

**Sunday, May 15, 2011**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

## **Sermon**

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Later today you and I will enter into a covenant. I will promise “to serve this church faithfully, preaching and teaching the word of God, administering the sacraments and fulfilling the pastoral office, according to the faith and order of the United Church of Christ.”

You will promise “to labor with me in the ministry of the gospel as a sign of our mutual ministry in Christ’s name.”

The United Church of Christ was founded as a covenant church. Covenant is a descriptive word that defines how we relate to God, to each other, to other churches, other religions, even creation. Covenant is a holy promise of devotion that is shared. God forms a bond of unity that is pliable and dynamic, not rigid or unresponsive. Unity is a result of a covenantal way of life and an amazing gift of God. Our UCC Statement of Faith defines covenant as “a gift of the Holy Spirit binding all faithful people together.” Covenant is how we relate to one another within our own church, but it also defines the relationship we share with the larger church.

While each congregation in the United Church of Christ has "autonomy," meaning we are free to discern our own way of being and believing, because of covenant, we bind our selves to one another beyond the local church—to associations, conferences, and the national setting. Our constitution puts it this way: "Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ walk together in all God's ways."

So, because of our covenant with the other settings of the church, this afternoon, the Litchfield North Association and the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ will join us in formalizing our commitment to one another.

I came across some notes on covenants in group settings this week which aptly characterize my hopes for our ongoing relationship.

“Anytime a group comes together there are unspoken expectations, feelings and thoughts. One of the most important elements when a group gathers is clarity about those expectations...this way no one will be disappointed when their expectations are not met.”

I do believe that one of the most important commitments we can make to one another is to be intentional about articulating our expectations. I would hope that honesty, clarity and integrity would be the hallmarks of our relationship. All of this is built on trust: trust in one another and trust in God.

Today’s reading from John, as well as Psalm 23, remind us that we do not have to depend solely on our own volition. God is right there – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – guiding us, ever so gently, like a shepherd, to where we need to go. Jesus uses the shepherd metaphor because it speaks directly to the lives of the people of his time. They understood the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. The shepherd provided protection, guidance, and care. He would seek those who wandered away and bring them back to the fold.

Jesus speaks first about the nature of a sheepfold – a place where shepherds gathered their flocks overnight,

where the intimacy of knowing and being known was experienced,

where the shared protection of walls and other shepherds ensured the flock was safe. “He calls his own sheep by name,” Jesus says, “and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” The sheepfold was a place of welcome, of community, of security and rest.

This is my vision of what the church can be. A place of welcome, community, security and rest. A place where each member is known and cared for. We often adopt the image of Jesus as the shepherd, but what he said was “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.” “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

Jesus is the gate! The way in . . . and the way out! The entry point, the access, the one through whom one must pass in order to find safety and respite. There are all kinds of gates, some that keep us in a safe place, like a playground gate, some that prevent us from entering, like an estate gate, and some that restrict our movement, like a barbed wire gate. Each gate signifies a place of passage, from one place to another.

And then there are gatekeepers, those who monitor the gates, deciding who gets through, who has access to what or whom. But Jesus doesn't say he's a *gatekeeper*. Jesus says “I am the gate.” He is the gate itself, inviting us to enter, and have abundant life.

We are being invited to go from one place – where we are – to another place-where God calls us to be. Jesus is the gate, the *way* to relationship and intimacy with God. Jesus is the gate to the place of welcome, security, freedom, and rest. He offers easy access, a genuine welcome, abundant living.

I believe that my role as your minister is to be the gatekeeper, to help you find access to what Jesus offers. I believe that my responsibility is to work with you to find the gate – where an extravagant welcome is offered to all. I am not the shepherd, nor the gate, but the gatekeeper – the one who points the way to the gate.

Reflecting on the shepherd/sheep metaphor, one writer pointed to the sovereignty of God as the shepherd, while describing the role of a minister as that of the sheep dog. The minister's role, she said is to make sure that no one strays from the flock. If you've ever watched a sheep dog running circles around the flock at a somewhat frantic pace – the description seems apt. I trust that the Lord is our shepherd and I am happy to take on the responsibility of helping the shepherd keep the flock together while also attending to the gate.

As I was writing this sermon I was reminded of a poem I read in my weekly prayer book some time ago. It is entitled, “I Stand By The Door” by Samuel Shoemaker who was an Episcopal Priest credited with providing the spiritual support for the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous.

For me, “I Stand by the Door” describes my role as your minister. . . .

I stand by the door.  
I neither go to far in, nor stay to far out.  
The door is the most important door in the world -  
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.  
There is no use my going way inside and staying there,  
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,  
Crave to know where the door is.

And all that so many ever find  
Is only the wall where the door ought to be.  
They creep along the wall like a blind person,

With outstretched, groping hands,  
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,  
Yet they never find it.  
So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world  
Is for a person to find that door - the door to God.  
The most important thing that any person can do  
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands  
And put it on the latch - the latch that only clicks  
And opens to the person's own touch.  
People die outside the door, as starving beggars die  
On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter.

Die for want of what is within their grasp.  
They live on the other side of it - live because they have not found it.  
Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,  
And open it, and walk in, and find God.

So I stand by the door.

Go in great saints; go all the way in -  
Go way down into the cavernous cellars,  
And way up into the spacious attics.  
It is a vast, roomy house, this house where God is.  
Go into the deepest of hidden casements,  
Of withdrawal, of silence, of sainthood.  
Some must inhabit those inner rooms  
And know the depths and heights of God,  
And call outside to the rest of us how wonderful it is.  
Sometimes I take a deeper look in.  
Sometimes venture in a little farther,  
But my place seems closer to the opening.

So I stand by the door.

There is another reason why I stand there.  
Some people get part way in and become afraid  
Lest God and the zeal of His house devour them;  
For God is so very great and asks all of us.  
And these people feel a cosmic claustrophobia  
And want to get out. 'Let me out!' they cry.  
And the people way inside only terrify them more.  
Somebody must be by the door to tell them that they are spoiled.  
For the old life, they have seen too much:  
One taste of God and nothing but God will do any more.  
Somebody must be watching for the frightened  
Who seek to sneak out just where they came in,  
To tell them how much better it is inside.

The people too far in do not see how near these are  
To leaving - preoccupied with the wonder of it all.  
Somebody must watch for those who have entered the door  
But would like to run away. So for them too,  
I stand by the door.  
I admire the people who go way in.  
But I wish they would not forget how it was  
Before they got in. Then they would be able to help  
The people who have not yet even found the door.  
Or the people who want to run away again from God.  
You can go in too deeply and stay in too long  
And forget the people outside the door.  
As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place,  
Near enough to God to hear Him and know He is there,  
But not so far from people as not to hear them,  
And remember they are there too.  
Where? Outside the door -  
Thousands of them. Millions of them.  
But - more important for me -  
One of them, two of them, ten of them.  
Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.  
So I shall stand by the door and wait  
For those who seek it.  
'I had rather be a door-keeper  
So I stand by the door.

I will stand by your door, I will open gates for you, I will welcome you in. I enter into covenant with you with complete humility, devotion and love.