

Sunday, May 25, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon: Rules to Live By

What are the rules that govern your life?

I don't mean laws – I mean those rules that everyone in your family or group of friends understands-

The unspoken code of conduct that gets passed along from one generation to the next.

Often these are rules that dictate behavior or dress – for example in my family no one ever wore white before Memorial Day – no white shoes, skirts, pants until after the Memorial Day Parade...and only until Labor Day – no white after Labor Day.

I have no idea what the purpose of this particular rule was.

I just know that no one ever broke it.

Last week, when I was packing my suitcase to go to my son's graduation I wanted to pack my new white pants – but I realized it was before Memorial Day, so I had a minor dilemma.

In the end I decided to break the rule and take them, however, somehow, they didn't get packed so I never wore them!

These rules that govern families and communities often change over time.

At a wonderful luncheon this past week a group of women from our church had a lively discussion about the changes they have witnessed in Salisbury in their 30-40-90 years here.

Janet Kaufman shared a piece of church memorabilia that outlined a complaint against Mr. John Eggleston on May 4, 1821:

Eggleston is accused of

1st Of using profane language, at different times and in various places in the Spring of 1820 (which would be one year before the complaint was filed)

2nd Of disorderly walk, by engaging, with vain company in dancing and card-playing in 1819 or 1820 (again well before the actual complaint)

3rd Of whistling and dancing on the Sabbath during the interval of Public worship, a short period previous to our last communion, in Mr. Bushnell's bar-room. (across the street from the Meeting House – now the Taylor's house).

Reflected in this short complaint is a rich commentary on the rules of proper behavior in Salisbury in 1821.

No mention of whether Mr. Eggleston was wearing white pants!

My point is that all groups – any community operates with a set of rules that govern the behavior of the greater body.

Historically, the motivation for such rules was the belief that it served the common good and created a civil society.

Without such rules, it was believed, we would have complete chaos –though I'm not sure what chaos is addressed by the white clothes rule.

Collectively, we follow the rules because they provide us with a sense of security – the stability that comes from clear expectations.

In John's gospel today, Jesus is trying to impart his idea of rules to his followers.

He urges them to understand that their lives will be enriched if they embrace his commands.

The writer of Acts picks up this same theme in today's reading.

He says *God has created us so that we would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us.*

Our mortal lives are spent seeking this closeness, this oneness with God.

The writer of Acts quotes Epimenides, a 6th century BC poet:

For In him we live and move and have our being.

Six hundred years before Christ was born the poets were describing the indwelling love of God who abides in us.

Jesus draws on this belief as he assures his followers that they will experience this oneness with God as a result of their love for each other.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Follow my rules and I can promise you your life will be enhanced.

Jesus knows that what he is asking is difficult – remember his commandment is to *Love God with all your heart soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself.*

In perhaps the most tender of promises he says, *I will not leave your orphaned* –a promise reiterated throughout the ages from parent to child – *I'll always be here – no matter what, but please follow the rules.*

Recognizing that his disciples will struggle in his absence he promises to send an advocate to be with them – to be in them – to guide them.

An advocate is a person who pleads for or in behalf of another; an intercessor. (*Wouldn't it be great to be able to send your children off with someone to watch over them*)

Jesus promises this help – not just to the disciples, but to us as well.

We, too are invited to be disciples – to adopt the discipline of a spiritual life,

Discipline which manifests as a concentrated effort to create the space and time in our lives that allows God's holy spirit to enter.

Spiritual discipline that involves both surrender and trust.

Surrender to God's power and trust in God's care.

In colonial times people paid closer attention to the movement of the Spirit in their lives.

One of my favorite accounts was that of Sarah Edwards, wife of theologian Jonathan Edwards, written on January 20, 1742.

Reflecting in her journal about a particular experience in Northampton, Massachusetts where they lived she wrote:

And while I was uttering the words, my mind was so deeply impressed with the love of Christ and a sense of His immediate presence that I could with difficulty refrain from rising from my seat and leaping for joy.

I continued to enjoy this intense and lively and refreshing sense of divine things, accompanied with strong emotions for nearly an hour; after which, I experienced a delightful calm and peace and rest in God until I retired for the night; and during the night, both waking and sleeping, I had joyful views of divine things, and a complacent rest of soul in God. I awoke in the morning of Thursday, Jan. 28th, in the same happy frame of mind and engaged in the duties of my family with a sweet consciousness that God was present with me and with earnest longings of soul for the continuance and increase of the blessed fruits of the Holy Spirit in the town.

I like the idea of seeing people leap for joy – overcome with the love of God.

This is the promise that Jesus makes to his disciples in this final prayer.

He assures them and us, that if we follow his commands, if we live our lives with love in our hearts, we will know his presence.

Our current culture does not necessarily promote such displays of piety – but perhaps that is a rule that we must challenge.

Maybe we would be better off if we shared our stories with one another about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Maybe our lives would be enriched if we expected to be moved by the spirit.

A prayer that I read this week captures our longing for this type of belief:

Jean Houston wrote:

Dear God,

How do I shift from where I am to the person You created me to be?

I know that I am capable of being more loving and compassionate.

I sense that there is so much more in me that lies dormant.

I feel like I have been skimming over the surface—occasionally dipping a foot or hand into something vast and wonderful.

I want to move more deeply into You.

I come once again to this place of surrender.

With an open mind and a receptive heart,

I place myself in Your hands.

I am not sure what is next, but I trust You.

Lead me Holy Spirit.

As I was reflecting on the importance of Memorial Day tomorrow, I was thinking about the strict rules followed by those in the military.

For those of us who have never served in a war, we cannot possibly imagine the self-discipline required to follow orders to put oneself in harm's way.

So much of our daily decision-making is focused on keeping ourselves and our loved ones out of harm's way – but the military is different.

Tomorrow we honor men and women who followed rules that cost their lives – selflessly sacrificing on our behalf.

They took seriously Jesus' command to love their neighbor.

We are their neighbors and they laid down their lives for us.

My friends, we all long to live in a peaceful, just society.

We collectively yearn to feel God's presence in our lives – to sense the movement of the Holy Spirit among us.

Our lesson today is that God is here, in us, among us, making his home in our being.

To access this power we simply must love.

It all boils down to this, as Jesus said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Let this be your rule – your guide – your life.

Amen.