

Sunday, July 5, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "The Word of the Prophet"

Today we celebrate the Fourth of July and Communion.

We hear from the Prophet Isaiah and from Jesus the teacher.

As I reflected on these seemingly disparate issues I realized that there is a common thread.

It is community.

On Fourth of July we celebrate our ancestor's vision for a country where they could live out their ideals of community.

The founders of this country were seeking to build a community free of tyranny, where each individual could pursue happiness in a peaceful, just environment.

They were looking for both religious and economic freedom.

When we gather at the communion table, we remind ourselves of the vision that Jesus had of a community where God and neighbor are loved as deeply as self.

We come to this table to share a common loaf and a common cup, as reminders that we are the body of Christ...one body.

Isaiah's prophecy characterized a vision for Judah and Jerusalem during the reigns of four kings, ranging over two centuries.

The people of Israel, beloved and chosen by God formed a community, lost that community to sin and indifference, were exiled from their community by violence and war and eventually, reestablished a community where peace and justice were the order of the day.

One commentator put it this way: "The words from Isaiah vividly remind us that God calls us to loose the bonds of injustice in tangible form—to free the oppressed, to break every yoke o share bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house. The promise for such action is God's presence. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help and God will say, "Here I am." Actions of justice, mercy, and peace will carry us into the role Isaiah prescribed for us as repairers of the breach, restorers of street to live in."

Isaiah's vision of community was one of peace and justice, where everyone would be welcome, safe, housed and fed.

Isaiah saw us a co-creators with God.

His promise is that if the community did what God asked, God would be present.

The early church that developed after Christ's crucifixion was almost completely based on communal living – sharing possessions and resources, bearing one another's burdens, caring for one another.

I have just returned from a week at Silver Lake Conference Center where almost 200 people, 90% of whom were under the age of 25, endeavor to live in Christian community.

My role as chaplain provides me with the opportunity to infuse conversations and activities with words of faith.

I walk around as a reminder to think about God.

One of the magical things about Silver Lake is that it is a place where young people seem comfortable being themselves.

It is wonderful to watch a child who might feel awkward or unnoticed in their home environment stand with self-confidence in front of a crowd – singing or leading a prayer for worship.

In the course of one short week lives are transformed.

Of course, they will have to return to their environments, but they return with the knowledge that there is something in them – a divine spark – that can sustain them on their journey.

A majority of the children at camp are return visitors; most of the staff are young people who spent years at Silver Lake as campers.

The feeling of belonging draws them back year after year.

Jesus would have been a natural at Silver Lake.

The young Nazarene, born under questionable circumstances, with a father who eked out a living with his hands, deprived of formal education, but with a heart for God.

Jesus would have been a camper who embraced the community with love.

What does it take to build community?

I think it starts with a shared vision.

French author, Antoine de Saint-Exupery said

"If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."

I think we need to long for something in order to build community.

I think that we need to long for God.

We need to build our lives around our hunger for God, our yearning for a spiritual presence in our lives.

We are created, born with this yearning – we ought to succumb to it.

We ought to feed our hunger for meaning with trust in God, with faith.

This past week at Silver Lake I encouraged the children to say ‘yes’ to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Each morning I would promote a different gift: Joy, Peace, Love, Kindness, Patience – and encourage the children to make that the theme for their day.

I urged them to yearn for a world where these gifts defined the norms of community.

At the end of the week I referenced Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

In an essay this week commentator Jim Wallis stated that as faith communities our greatest responsibility today is to offer hope.

He said, “Hope is not just feeling, but a decision. Hope is our vocation and our identity as the people of God.”

He concluded his essay with a few verses from Lamentations:

"Yet, I still dare to hope when I remember this:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercies never come to an end.

They are new every morning — new every morning.

Great is your faithfulness Oh Lord — great is your faithfulness."

Hope and love; joy and peace; patience and kindness; faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – these are the hallmarks of a healthy community.

Let’s strive to create such a community. Start in your home.

Come each week to be rejuvenated in your yearnings in this faith community.

Carry these values out into the communities where you work and play.

Take them with you on vacation this summer.

My friends, it is Fourth of July, Independence Day.

It is Communion Sunday – dependence day.

It is a new month, a new season, a time for hope.

Let us embrace the visions of our ancestors, both biblical and cultural, and strive to create a community that can live up to the moniker, “America the Beautiful.”