

**Sunday, August 31, 2014**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon - Using Our Gifts**

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Imagine if you will, someone coming to your door – perhaps with a gun, and telling you that you must leave.

Someone else is going to live in your house now and you and your family will have to find someplace else to live.

If you resist you will imperil the lives of your spouse and your children.

While you might think this the storyline of a scary movie, in reality it is the history of the biblical Israelites, the American Indians, the African slaves, as well as the current day plight of Christians living in parts of Iraq, and Palestinians living in territory occupied by Israel.

What would you do?

What happens to a culture when it is displaced or eradicated?

What happens to a people who are told that they do not deserve to exist – that to continue living they must ‘assimilate’ become similar to their oppressors?

In the past week, since I have been back, several of you have asked me why I went to South Dakota – what purpose is there in a week’s worth of toil for a population whose despair is so deep.

Quite simply, I went to South Dakota – we went to South Dakota – to show the people of LaPlant that they are not forgotten.

Our being there was a statement of recognition – ‘you matter, you are not invisible, your neighbors in Connecticut care about you.’

Our task – as defined by Simply Smiles – the coordinating organization – was to bring hope to the residents of LaPlant.

We had a three pronged strategy: helping to build a community center where the residents could gather; providing a day camp for the children, so they could experience the joy of play; and offering meals and activities for the people of LaPlant to gather and start building a community.

In 2011, after spending two months on the Reservation, Bryan Nurnberger, founder of Simply Smiles wrote this:

“The needs on the Reservation are staggering. There is tangible, visible poverty. Unemployment hovers around 90%. The result being a laundry list of horrors: Families living in trailer homes designed for southern climates, their thin walls just a shell against a place that can see a 150 degree plus temperature range in a calendar year. A lack of appropriate medical

care in the face of a diabetes epidemic. Surviving on insufficient and paralyzing government aid, including commodity food stuffs.

He continued: One may argue that spiritual or emotional poverty is intangible, that you cannot touch or see this form of suffering. But that individual need only visit the Reservation. Suicide, either from one acute action or through the prolonged method of substance abuse is evidence enough. A people robbed of their identity and sense of worth by laws, boarding schools, missionaries, and countless broken promises are now being accosted by the mythology of an American life that's pumped in through cheap satellite televisions. Look into their eyes, hold a child you just know is being abused, feel the frustration in the air – they're all as tangible as a collapsed roof. It seems that there is virtually no sense of community.”

This is what we went to work on.

We brought our own sense of community to a people who are just learning to trust their neighbors, let alone a group of strangers from across the country.

The Lakota people are part of the Sioux tribe.

Much of their heritage has been lost over the last 100 years.

We saw almost no one between the ages of 25-40.

Many of the young people have left the reservation or succumbed to the tragedies of drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide. Grandparents are raising children.

Our mission was to sow seed of hope in those children.

According to tradition, the twelve core qualities that are crucial to the Lakota way of living are:

Bravery, fortitude, generosity, wisdom, respect, honor, perseverance, love, humility, sacrifice, truth and compassion.

You will note the similarity to our own reading this morning when Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Paul points out that ‘There is no law against such things.’

I would add that these gifts are free – free to distribute in abundance.

My friends, working through the holy spirit, God has gifted us with these fruits.

Our responsibility – our obligation – is to share those gifts as often and as generously as we possible can.

Jesus traveled to the most forsaken places and reached out a hand of healing, a hand of love to those people rejected by society.

This is what we were doing in South Dakota.

This is the way of life to which we are called.

While we were in South Dakota, Betsy Beck – deacon, choir member, bell choir member, is sitting by the bedside of her very ill sister in Birmingham, Alabama.

She sent me this reflection on her experience earlier in the week:

“Here’s what is really important:

1. Take one day at a time. Wake up, do what you have to do, take care of yourself, get a good night's sleep, and get up and do it again. And again. And you turn around one day and you realize that 3 weeks have gone by. One day at a time.

2. Treat everybody you meet with kindness. Learn their names. Thank them for their efforts. This matters in life. We do this because it's the thing to do. What we see is that people spend more time with us; they listen to our stories; they pay (perhaps) a bit more attention. And we learn about their lives. Taylor just got engaged and is trying to plan his wedding for November; Ray was with us on his first day back from paternity leave; Selena has survived a stroke - she used to drag race and once paddled a canoe down a creek that was full of water moccasins. One of the administrators at the LTACH we visited today is going this weekend to visit his parents and sister in Plymouth, Michigan. (For those of you who don't know, that is where our aunt and uncle lived and where Mike and I got married.) Those are the bonuses. You do this because it makes the world a little nicer - both ways. You do this because it's the thing to do.

3. Do not take anything for granted. It turns out that this is not really a cliché. It's the truth.

We go countless times up and down in the hospital elevators. The neurology floor is the 8th floor. It's not fun to go to that floor. But the people who are going to the 9th floor are going to trauma and burn units. People on the 7th are surgical; people on the 5th are cardiac. People ride these elevators in silence, holding their hearts in their hands and trying to keep things together. We are not alone here.

Let there be no mistake. This stinks. This is a horrible, horrible situation we are dealing with. The event and the illness are all bad enough. The not knowing and the looking honestly at what is in front of us while holding onto threads of hope for what will be or what might be is a constant challenge. We can barely plan for tomorrow let alone for next week. We want to be in the moment while the pull of our lives and what we need to do lurks just outside. And we hold onto hope because it is there; we hold onto hope because ... well, just because we have to. Many of you keep throwing the lifelines to us. We only hope that you understand what a difference you make, even when you say that there is nothing you can do. You are all DOING a lot, even if you're only reading these updates and thinking a quiet good thought.”

Betsy has articulated well the power of hope in the face of despair.

This is what we were doing in South Dakota.

This is what we ought to be doing every day of our lives.

I want to close with an anonymous poem called

*The Difference*

I got up early one morning

and rushed right into the day;

I had so much to accomplish

That I didn't have time to pray

Problems just tumbled about me

and heavier came each task;

"Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered

He said, "But you didn't ask"

I wanted to see joy and beauty

but the day toiled on, gray and bleak;

I wondered why God didn't show me.

He said, "But you didn't seek."

I tried to come into God's presence;

I used all my keys at the lock.

God gently and lovingly chided

"My Child, you didn't knock."

I woke up early this morning

and paused before entering the day.

I had so much to accomplish

that I had to take time to pray.

Let us pray an Indian Prayer:

Oh Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds

And whose breath gives life to everyone,

Hear me.

I come to you as one of your many children;

I am weak...I am small...I need your wisdom and your strength.

Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunsets.

Make my hands respect the things you have made, and make my ears sharp so I may hear your voice.

Make me wise, so that I may understand what you have taught my people and

The lessons you have hidden in each leaf and each rock.

I ask for wisdom and strength,

Not to be superior to my brothers, but to be able to fight my greatest enemy, myself.

Make me ever ready to come before you with clean hands and a straight eye,

So as life fades away as a fading sunset,

My spirit may come to you without shame.

O God, hear our prayers this day for those whom we love.

For those who are sick we pray for healing – especially Betty,

For those who mourn, we pray for comfort –

For those whose lives are mired in despair, we pray for hope.

Hear us now as we turn to you in the sacred silence of this Meetinghouse with the prayers of our hearts....