

Sunday, August 9, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – " We are all in this together"

A baby is baptized: we see new beginnings; we have feelings of hope;

A family that has grown up in the church shares their gift of music: gratitude warms our hearts; their words give grace that we yearn for;

An elderly parent lies at the end of his life with the promise of redemption ready to give himself up as Jesus did.

We feel a sense of peace.

These are the moments that make up community.

These are the ties that bind us to one another for life.

The author of this letter, writing in Paul's name, is urging the readers to adopt a way of life that nourishes souls, which builds community.

A few weeks ago, one of the members of the church I served in Roxbury, Jacqui Winterkorn, died.

Jacqui was an intelligent, accomplished neuro-optomologist who lived with debilitating Parkinson's disease for years.

She was generous of spirit and tenderhearted.

Jacqui was the person in the church who relentlessly organized fellowship activities.

She was adamant that we must get to know one another in good times so that we would be there to support one another when times were tough.

She lived that belief right to the end of her life.

She truly was an imitator of God.

Perhaps it is not easy to follow Paul's prescription for being a good Christian, but our goal is not to achieve perfection, but to be striving toward it.

Last Thursday evening, the church council met to hash out some difficult issues.

I opened the meeting with Paul's words encouraging the group to "Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

The council had an energetic meeting where different opinions were expressed and each person was listened to and consensus was reached on the issue.

It was not easy or comfortable – but that is Paul’s point.

To be a follower of Christ, an imitator of God, is not easy or comfortable!

All of our lives involve circumstances when we will feel angry, or say something that hurts another, but we are encouraged to put that aside, as best we are able – to not be consumed by the negative energy created by such feelings.

Paul calls us to live in the positive realm of kindness, forgiveness and grace.

God has placed us in this realm, created us to be in community.

The Congregational model of church is based entirely on the belief that we are better together than alone.

Better when we worship together.

Better when we confess our sins together.

Better when we sing our joys together.

Better when we bear one another’s burdens.

New Testament Professor Brian Peterson, in reflecting on this passage said:

“A traditional part of the baptismal liturgy (which we just heard) is the renouncing of all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises.

As we enter into the new life in Christ, we enter into a new community and a new culture with a particular way of living with one another.”

Though today’s reading does not place these instructions in an explicitly baptismal context, it is that new life as God’s people in Christ that this passage urges upon us.

This is, in more detail, what the author meant in the earlier instruction to “put away the former way of life.”

New life in Christ means relinquishing what is false, and a making a commitment to speak the truth to one another.

It may not be a coincidence that this call to speak truth is followed by a call not to let anger become the occasion for sin.

The church ought to be the place where the truth can be spoken: the difficult truths about our world and about ourselves, and the gracious truth about the God who has redeemed us.

Peterson points out that “We are rather skilled in using a self-justifying excuse of “speaking the truth” as a cover for our efforts to manipulate, retaliate, and tear down others. All such behavior is simply a lie masquerading as the truth.”

The writer of Ephesians wants us to understand that there are times when not being angry would be sin.

There should be anger against all the effects of injustice and oppression, both inside and outside the church.

At other times, our anger is simply our last desperate attempt to defend ourselves against the new world that God is calling forth and against God’s servants who are urging us into that new kingdom.

Even though some anger might be justified, we should not read this text as an excuse to feel angry, and certainly not as an excuse to feed and nurture such anger.

Verse 31 tells us to put away all anger which seems to contradict the imperative to “be angry” in verse 26.

The tension suggests that the force of verse 26 may be something closer to “when you are angry, do not sin.”

We are called to speak the truth, but not to let whatever anger we experience linger and fester, because we belong to one another.

We may not be able to avoid anger, and indeed there may be times when anger is not only understandable but also appropriate.

There is a line in the wedding service that I use that says: “Marriage deepens and enriches every facet of life.

Happiness is fuller, memories are fresher, commitment is stronger, even anger is felt more strongly, and passes more quickly.

Marriage understands and forgives the mistakes life is unable to avoid.

It encourages and nurtures new life, new experiences, and new ways of being.”

I think that as a community of faith, bound together by our baptismal vows and covenant we ought to hold ourselves to the same standard as a marriage.

This letter is a call to pay open-eyed attention to the needs of those around us, so that we can discern the good thing that our neighbors need and then do it.

Thus both in our actions and in our words our lives become conduits for the grace of God to others.

In this passage, it is especially our words that receive attention.

Our words to one another matter.

The words to be avoided are not simply “evil”, but rotten, decaying, and corrosive.

The vices to avoid are particularly those things that are expressed in destructive speech.

All these things that would tear down relationships have no place in the church, and they are contrary to the Spirit’s intent, not only because they impede our ability to engage in the mission to which God has called us, but because they are a failure to reflect Christ himself, who is the foundation of this new life.

Our writer calls us to nothing less than a life of imitating God.

Such a call may seem absurd; to think that we could “imitate God” might be the height of arrogance.

However, this call to imitation is founded on the love of Christ for us.

One writer reminds us that “Jesus himself is the footsteps of God through this world, not simply giving us an example to follow by our own determination, but cutting the path for us and then pulling us along.

We imitate by grace, not as those who are goaded and threatened into stepping in only the right places, but as those who are loved into walking this path.”

It may be significant that the imperative in Ephesians 5:1 indicates that this imitation is an ongoing process.

We might translate it as “Keep on becoming imitators of God ...” Martin Luther said:

“This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.”

So as you go out into the world this week, the crazy world of name calling and belittling of those who disagree with you, remember Paul’s words and strive to be tenderhearted, honest, gracious imitators of God.

It will make our community, and the world, a better place to be.