

September 11, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Peace Through Understanding”

Welcome home! Friends and neighbors, newcomers and old timers, welcome.

Today we start anew.

Today we start with clean hearts-with a new and right spirit within.

It is an interesting day – one where we are caught up in the excitement of new beginnings, but also weighed down with the remembrance of horrific violence just 15 years ago.

Today we turn our hearts to God asking both why and what next?

We can't help but wonder why 9/11 happened and why so many people have died in terrorist attacks around the world since 2001.

The day is full of questions:

Where was God on that beautiful autumn day?

Where is God now?

What does God have in store for us?

What does the future look like?

What role will we play?

How have we changed in the past 15 years?

For many 9/11 signifies a time when our American sense of security and superiority was vanquished.

Others remember 9/11 as a moment in time when our country put differences aside and came together to grieve.

Still others claim that the terrorists were victorious that fateful day because our country has become so divided with our civil discourse deteriorating into civil war.

Fear has triumphed.

Those we call 'other' have been cemented in our psyche as the 'enemy.'

In an essay this week called 'Your Neighbor and Beyond' Eboo Patel, an international advocate for interfaith understanding, said that there are 'four ways to approach the other'

1. We can build bunkers of isolation, and try to hide ourselves away.
2. We can build barriers of division, and speak only of the areas of disagreement and difference.
3. We can wield bludgeons of destruction, and seek to dominate through violence.
4. Or we can build bridges of cooperation, leading with love and seeking connection.”

As we mark this fifteenth anniversary of 9/11 we must commit to building relationships that will deter future violence and destruction – we must build bridges that will foster love and peace.

Today appropriately marks the beginning of our year-long study of peace through understanding.

Together we are going to explore cultures and religions different than our own in an effort to gain a better understanding of our neighbors.

We are not going to limit ourselves to reading the sacred texts of other religions, trying to interpret their meaning.

We are going to go deeper than our intellect, striving to reach our hearts and our souls.

We will listen to music and read the poetry and literature of cultures beyond our four walls.

We will engage in thoughtful dialogue with people who know more than we do about these things.

Already we are learning in the process. One of our musicians gave us feedback on the program booklet, enhancing our understanding of the divide between religious and secular Muslims.

We will look at the artwork generated over the centuries to gain insight into the lives of different people.

In learning about others, we will be learning about ourselves.

Jack and I have been researching, preparing for next week’s event for the past few months- actually the past year.

Last week we put together the program booklet for next Sunday’s program on Islam.

I had the opportunity to research Islam as a religion, but also Islam as a culture – the art, poetry, and music.

I came away with a completely different picture in my mind of our Muslim neighbors.

A picture of a deeply spiritual people, committed to beauty, committed to peace.

The concert will give you a glimpse into Sufi music written to enhance the mystical worship of the Mevlevi (whirling) dervishes.

You will have an opportunity to hear how Mozart interpreted Christian-Muslim relations in the 18th century Ottoman empire.

This is a project for the entire congregation.

Children are welcome to come and experience the wonder of another culture.

Each one of you is invited to open your heart to greater understanding of those we call 'other.'

This is an opportunity to follow Jesus' example of reaching out to those who might have been marginalized or forgotten.

We are exploring the question: 'Who is our neighbor?'

Who are our brothers and sisters?

When Jesus talks about looking for the lost sheep or sweeping the floor in search of a missing coin, could he be talking about us?

We often read this text as God searching for us – as if we are the lost sheep or the lost coin.

It is reassuring to think that no matter how lost we might be God will search for us, find us and bring us home.

But what if we are the ones who are supposed to be looking?

What if God expects us to reach out to the one who is lost?

I think God wants us to search our hearts and our lives to find the valuable 'coin' hidden from our sight.

We are to seek the lost sheep and bring her home.

The NY Times reported this week that 50 million of the world's refugees are children.

50 million children wandering the earth searching for a place to call home.

Many churches in the CT conference are engaged in refugee resettlement efforts.

We are going to be joining our neighbors at St. Mary's and Trinity Lime Rock in helping a Syrian family settling in Salisbury this week.

A volunteer from the Gilead Congregational church described his experience providing transportation for a family from the airport to their new home:

"Imagine flying to an unfamiliar country. You are greeted by strangers who drive you to meet more strangers, who then drive you to a place you've never seen and told it will be your new home. Everything you own, you are wearing. Imagine your children sleeping in the car beside you, too exhausted from fear and travel to stay awake. Your family's future depends on the

strangers driving the car, the strangers waiting at the new home. You have no job, no income, no friends. You don't even speak the language.”

I came across this picture of five refugee children in one of the holding camps – five beautiful smiling children. I thought to myself – these are the Syrian refugees people are afraid of?



I think these five beautiful children in the refugee camp are as much God's treasure as our beautiful children assembled here this morning.

I think that we are called by God, commanded by God, to search until we find the lost sheep and love that being back to wholeness.

As I thought about searching I couldn't help but remember the people, firefighters and chaplains, relatives and volunteers who spent weeks searching the rubble of the Twin Towers seeking to recover the smallest fragments of lives lost. Seeking, searching – it is part of our faith journey.

Today also marks the beginning of our Trustees deliberations on our budget for 2017.

They are charged, entrusted, with the important task of determining how we will use our resources to build God's kingdom on earth.

The Christian Action committee will also convene this morning to discern the ways that we, as a congregation, will live out our Christian values in the world.

Both committees are aptly named: those we trust with the stewardship of our assets;

and those who call us to action in the name of Christ.

This Christian way of life we have adopted takes energy.

It takes time.

It requires commitment.

God has called us to carry out the work that Jesus started.

God has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us.

God's grace sustains us in the struggle.

If we want the world to be different, it is up to us to restore the light in this darkness.

It is up to us to be the body of Christ.

It is up to us to show the world how Christians live.

My friends, how we live is up to us.

Let the words of the choirs response this morning ring in your ears – in your hearts throughout the coming week:

Here in this place the new light is streaming;

now is the darkness vanished away;

see in this space our fear and our dreamings

brought here to you in the light of this day.

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken;

gather us in, the blind and the lame;

Call to us now and we shall awaken;

We shall arise at the sound of our name.

Let today be a new beginning for you.

Let God's glorious light shine brightly in your heart and soul as you reach out a loving hand to your neighbor.

Let God's love change you.