

Sunday, September 16, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Where Two or Three Are Gathered”

I came upon a story this week in a book entitled, “Some Things Are Too Good Not to be True.”

How Will the Church Be Lighted?

Several centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople.

He made a good decision.

He decided to build them a church.

No one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished.

At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church.

Everything had been thought of and included.

It was a masterpiece.

But then someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps?"

It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?"

The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp, which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship.

"Each time you are here" the nobleman said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted.

Each time you are not here, that place will be dark.

This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark."

This touching story speaks to the importance of covenant in community.

When you enter into a covenant and agree to be part of a community you are trusting that the other people will uphold their end – while you commit to hold up your own.

If either falls short, the covenant is breached and darkness prevails.

The dictionary defines community as : a social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect

from the larger society within which it exists.

The dictionary adds a definition for *Ecclesiastical communities*: a group of men or women leading a common life according to a rule.

This is who we are. A community of faith who come together to profess a belief in God as our creator, Jesus Christ as our savior and redeemer and the Holy Spirit as the sustaining force in our lives.

The rule that we follow is to love God with our whole heart, soul and minds and our neighbor as ourselves.

It is simple.

It is clear.

What presents a challenge is how we live out this faith and this rule in today's complicated world.

You see, communities can be built around good – but they can also be formed around evil.

A shared belief, a rule can be destructive and divisive.

While I was in Austria last month I had the opportunity to visit the Mauthausen concentration camp, built by the Nazis in 1938 outside the small, quaint town of Enn.

The camp is situated on a beautiful Austrian hilltop, with panoramic views.

It was chilling to walk through the empty camp and imagine the pain and grief that had transpired there.

The Mauthause camp operated from 1938-45 as a hard labor camp for prisoners, mostly from Poland, who were identified as the intelligentsia or political adversaries.

There is a large quarry where the prisoners worked 12-15 hours a day. Many died of exhaustion and malnourishment – while many others were exterminated in the on-site crematorium.

It is uncertain exactly how many people died there, the records were not well kept, but the estimates run from 100-300,000.

For seven years this sprawling facility operated as a community.

Slave labor was made available to local factories, people reported to work each day as guards, administrators and medical personnel. There were strict guidelines for behavior – shared rules – a covenant of sort - that governed this community of evil.

I know that many of you, as veterans or as world travelers have encountered such places in your lives.

I bring it up today to remind us what happens when evil comes to power.

In our reading today Jesus provides his followers with a very specific protocol to follow when someone among them has sinned – or turned away from God.

His ‘rule’ reminds us that in community everyone has a responsibility for outcome.

“If another member of the church sins against you go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone...if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you.”

Keep working at it until the person has acknowledged their wrongdoing.

If your efforts with that person are unsuccessful, walk away – but pray for that person and leave it up to God.

Jesus’ final words, “Truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them.”

I am particularly drawn to this promise.

The idea that Jesus is present when two or three are gathered keeps me alert to that presence.

There are many instances in my daily life, as in yours, where two or three people are gathered.

Jesus did not say that he would just be present at worship services or in a church.

He said, where two or three are gathered.

Think of that.

Jesus is in the classroom, the boardroom, at the coffee shop, at Bible study...anyplace two or three people are gathered and conscious of the possibility of Jesus.

Jesus promises that the petitions or prayers of two or three will be heard.

This gives me the strength to stand up to evil; to live by my values.

This promise allows me to imagine how the prisoners in the Mauthausen Prison Camp were able to survive.

This promise gives me hope that the people in Syria will find a peaceful resolution to their differences;

This promise gives me hope that the tragedy of September 11, 2001 will never happen again.

I have asked you, as a congregation, to read Robin Meyers book, *The Underground Church – Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*.

Perhaps the title has put some of you off – too radical, too scary.

The book could just as easily been titled “The Genuine Church” or

“Reclaiming the Church of Jesus Christ.”

I would encourage all of you to explore Reverend Meyer’s challenge to build communities of trust.

There is much in this book to speak to our community here as we move forward in a society that often disregards religion and faith as quaint and unimportant.

A few of the points that resonated most profoundly with me include:

- One of our highest and most sacred obligations in the Underground Church is to look for the good that’s not there yet, Search until we see it;
- Trust is a visible manifestation of grace, yet churches are often full of people who do not trust one another.
- When radically embodied trust replaces intellectual assent to theological propositions, we slowly but surely create people who possess and practice radical trust.

Meyers points out that if Jesus is our model for living rather than just an object of worship, then most of things we fight about in the church disappear.

He states that in the Underground Church, “we will worship God by following Jesus, and we will follow Jesus by loving the neighbor—

for nothing”, he says, “can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbors.”

I do believe that when we make a commitment, a covenant with one another to build a community of trust, rooted in our faith in Jesus Christ, we can transform ourselves and stand up to evil in the world.

I invite you, this week, to reflect on the many communities of which you are a part: work, sports teams, neighborhoods, schools...

What is it that holds those communities together – what is the central value – what or whom is worshipped or honored in those communities?

I think it is important that we are deliberate in our actions and clear about our values when we are establishing or maintaining a community.

Another story came to my attention last week describing

an African tribe that has a unique way of handling conflict or transgression in the community. This might be a folktale, but the message is poignant.

“When someone does something hurtful and wrong, they take the person to the center of town, and the entire tribe comes and surrounds him.

For two days they'll tell the man every good thing he has ever done.

The tribe believes that every human being comes into the world as Good, each of us desiring safety, love, peace, happiness.

But sometimes in the pursuit of those things people make mistakes. The community sees misdeeds as a cry for help.

They band together for the sake of their fellow man to hold him up, to reconnect him with his true Nature, to remind him who he really is, until he fully remembers the truth from which he'd temporarily been disconnected:

"I AM GOOD."

I am good. You are good. There is goodness in every one of God's children when their hearts are full of love and they are open to the gift of God's grace.

In the church of the future, our church, each person is valued; each voice is heard; everyone matters.

Let us make a commitment to move forward in this troubled world standing up to evil; working for justice; seeking new and innovative ways that we might help our neighbors.

Let us be the ones who work for peace – in our hearts, in our homes and in the world.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, hear our prayers this day as we seek to become a community of followers of Jesus Christ. Grant us the grace to be, creative in our planning, courageous in our efforts and bold in our actions. Empower us to stand up to evil – to be a source of light in this dark and threatening world.

Dear God, help us to put our fears aside and to open our hearts to our neighbors. Grant us the eyes to see and the ears to hear the challenges that lay before us.

Hear our individual prayers this day for those whom we love.

We pray for Kathy, Ann, Patricia, Barbara, Mark, Dick, Alvord, Theresa, Kit, Claude, Becky, Julia, Peter, Michele, Warren, Jane, Dean, John, David

May your healing touch be upon each one.

We pray for those who grieve – that our love might ease their pain.

We pray for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who live with poverty, violence, fear and loneliness. May each one come to know your love and your peace.

We celebrate the joys and blessings in our lives as we turn to you in silence with the prayers of our hearts....

Jesus taught them to pray in these words....Our Father