

Sunday, September 22, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "God of Covenant, People of Covenant"

I was raised in the Catholic Church. Every single Sunday for my entire childhood I attended church with my family. I went to some form of religious education class weekly from the time I was six until I was sixteen. Attendance was mandatory. There were no options.

I was there in body – all those Sundays and all those classes, but I never created room in my soul for the Spirit.

When I left for college, I left church behind.

For almost twenty years, I never looked back.

In my forties I felt a strong yearning for a spiritual presence in my life.

I did a bit of church shopping, but returned to the Catholic Church because it was familiar.

As my faith was awakening, and my awareness of God's presence permeating my life, I realized that I was not in the right church.

The God that I was hearing about in church was not the God that I was experiencing throughout the week.

I began searching for a place where my secular self and my spiritual self could be one – a place where I could feel genuine, whole and blessed.

I found my way, by invitation of some friends, to the local Congregational Church.

I still remember clearly the first Sunday I worshiped in the Bridgewater Church.

I was deeply touched by the sense of community and the familiarity of the parishioners.

People knew one another – I knew many of them – and I remember being moved by the prayers that were specific to the issues of the day and the people this congregation cared about.

It all felt deeply personal and intimate.

I followed that visit with multiple visits and conversations with the pastor as well as hours spent on the UCC website exploring the history, polity and beliefs of this denomination.

I felt I had found a spiritual home.

I joined with tremendous enthusiasm and commitment.

A few years later I decided to pursue ordination to the ministry.

In the ensuing years I have come to love this church and all that it stands for.

I am what I would call an "Intentional Congregationalist."

Some of you may be “Cradle Congregationalists” born into this denomination, but my guess is that many if not most of you were raised in different traditions.

One of the strengths of the United Church of Christ is that people from all different faith experiences feel welcome here.

I want to spend some time this morning talking about what it means to be part of the United Church of Christ and exactly what we mean when we say “Our polity is Congregational.”

To start with: We are a covenant people...a covenant is different than any other relationship because it is infused with God’s grace.

In our Old Testament reading today, Jeremiah laments the breach of covenant that has occurred.

In earlier and then again in subsequent verses Jeremiah affirms God’s covenant with the people of Israel: You will be my people and I will be your God. This is God’s eternal promise.

Our church is based on this biblical covenant which we are called to live out in this time and place.

Our covenantal relationships are like a wheel with spokes going out in all directions.

We are in covenant with one another to be the Salisbury Congregational Church.

Each one of us, by virtue of baptism, confirmation or membership affirmation has agreed to be in relationship with the gathered congregation for worship and service.

We have a responsibility – one that we committed to – to care for one another.

We are also in covenant with all of the United Church of Christ churches in Connecticut.

We have a responsibility on that level to care about what happens in other churches and communities.

We cannot isolate ourselves and turn away from our neighbors.

While *Congregational Polity* implies autonomy – it does not promote isolation.

Over the next week, I, along with a few others from our church, will participate in two important events in the life of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ.

First, starting later tonight and continuing on through Monday and Tuesday, the three hundred and fourth gathering of the Connecticut Clergy, called General Association, will take place at Silver Lake.

Our General Association of ministers was founded in 1709, with the corresponding area Associations of ministers and Consociations of churches.

“In early New England, where a few isolated churches struggled for survival, congregations realized their future depended on helping one another.

Sharing the few available ordained clergy, they exchanged best practices and helped one another

endure harsh physical winters and equally harsh theological storms.”

The advice of the General Association was sought by governors and other leaders of Connecticut.

Today, the General Association gathering is a time for clergy to discuss best practices, to rejuvenate with engaging guest lecturers and to share in worship with one another.

The second event that I will attend is the Service of Installation for our new Conference minister, the Reverend Kent Siladi.

I was surprised to learn that Reverend Siladi will be only the fifth person to serve as conference minister.

For the first two hundred years of the Congregational Church in Connecticut, there was no one leader.

The General Association of Clergy was responsible for governance.

Our covenant with the Connecticut Conference office is one that is built on mutual support.

The Conference staff provides us with expertise on issues affecting the business of the church, ongoing support for clergy – and churches in search of clergy. We, in turn, provide financial support to sustain the conference operations.

The third area of covenant within the UCC is the national setting.

Here our covenant is again one of mutual support.

A portion of our contribution to the Connecticut Conference goes to the national setting.

There it is combined with all the other conference donations and used to promote worldwide outreach and Christian action.

Additionally, the national setting provides us with expansive resources for worship planning, bible study, church operations and investment opportunities.

The theme of our covenant in the United Church of Christ is drawn from Jesus’ words that we heard in our reading today. “That they may all be one.”

This is not a call for conformity, but unity. One does not mean same – it means one heart – the heart of Jesus Christ.

In the United Church of Christ, we have no creeds.

It is Covenant that binds us together.

We are under God’s guidance in Jesus Christ to further the mission of God’s love in Christ.

The Connecticut Conference’s mission statement outlines our covenant this way:

Created by God,
Called by Jesus Christ,
Guided by the Holy Spirit,
We are the Connecticut Conference,
the United Church of Christ in Connecticut.
We come together as Local Churches and
members to equip one another
to proclaim the Gospel to the communities
of Connecticut and to the world
by teaching the Good News of Jesus Christ,
doing the work of reconciliation and justice,
and living faithfully in daily life.

The mission statement that we are proposing for our church draws on this and states:

Created by God, Called by Jesus Christ, Guided by the Holy Spirit we seek to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves through worship, education and service.

A few years ago, I was at a clergy gathering and someone was lamenting attendance numbers in their church.

A colleague of mine said “I never focus on who is not there, I look out from the pulpit each Sunday and give thanks to God for every person who made the decision to be there.”

That sentiment stayed with me.

Each Sunday I look out from this pulpit and I give thanks to God for each of you.

I want to work with you to create a church that you want to be a part of.

A church that makes you feel genuine, whole and blessed.

That is the beauty of our denomination. We are free to discern what God is calling us to do and what we, here in Salisbury, might do to answer that call.