

**Sunday, September 25, 2011**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

## **Sermon**

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*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.*

These words from Paul's letter provide clear direction as we move to the second step on our journey toward a more compassionate life.

Our next step is to, "Look at Your Own World."

Last week we learned that "Compassion means to endure, suffer, undergo or experience something with another person."

As we work toward creating a more compassionate world, Karen Armstrong urges us to "think outside the box, reconsider the major categories of our time and find new ways of dealing with today's challenges."

The Old Testament reading from Ezekiel this morning spoke exactly to this point.

In the first four verses of this reading the prophet Ezekiel challenges the prevailing reasoning that the sins of the fathers are playing themselves out in the lives of subsequent generations.

While there is certainly truth in the idea that the past shapes the present, Ezekiel seems to view this as a cover-up or excuse for inaction and responsibility.

He discounts this proverbial wisdom saying, "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins who shall die."

His intention is to help people reframe a long-held belief about sin and history.

Ezekiel wants each person to take responsibility for their own behavior – not to blame the past or use it as an excuse for failing to live righteously.

He asserts that we each have the ability to create a new heart and a new spirit within ourselves.

The question here is not really whether or not we want to take responsibility for our own choices, but rather, are we willing and able to make changes in our lives when needed?

This past week I have lived through a few transitions.

Last Sunday we celebrated, with joy, the ministry of Reverend Dick Taber.

In granting Pastor Emeritus status to Dick, we acknowledged that the life of the church is ongoing, that individual contributions of time and talent are valued and that the collective wisdom of those who have served is an invaluable asset to the community.

Later in the week, Joe and I sold the house where we lived for the past 14 years.

In that house, that home, we raised our two sons, grew in our own careers, said goodbye to my mother and made many good friends.

There is nothing like packing up a house to remind you that you do not, and cannot, control time.

We enjoyed looking through the boy's memorabilia, laughed at how young we looked in pictures from years gone by and marveled at the progress we made on the house itself.

From the vantage point of leaving, we were able to see things differently than we did when we were living in the midst of it.

Next we selected our next house, made an offer and started envisioning our future.

New houses provide the opportunity for a fresh start.

Old things have passed away, but God promises that new things are always coming.

Finally, as a community, we said goodbye to Charlotte Reid yesterday.

Memorial services always provide a way of looking at our own lives, as well as those of others.

We are able to ask ourselves, "What will people say about me when I'm gone?" "What have I done to transform the world or touch people's lives?"

Armstrong suggests "during this second step, we should take ourselves mentally to the summit of a high mountain, where we can stand back and see things from a different perspective."

I picture the whole congregation climbing up to the top of Lion's Head and looking down at the community, asking ourselves if we are reaching everyone.

Are we providing Christ's light to the people we meet?

Are we harbingers of hope?

Armstrong instructs that "we should not approach our task with the harsh zeal of a reformer; there should be no anger, frustration or impatience in our survey. We must look at our community with compassion, estimate its strengths as well as its weaknesses and assess its potential for change."

I love this instruction. Change does not have to be in response to a crisis.

Change is a good thing.

It is how we grow and mature as a people.

A few years ago, Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book called *The Tipping Point*.

He sagely points out “there is a moment in time when things change, when the unexpected becomes the expected, where radical change is more than possibility. It is – contrary to our expectations, a certainty.”

He tells the story of corn farmers in Iowa in the 1930’s.

A new corn seed was introduced in 1928 that was far superior to the seed used previously.

The use of the superior seed took several years to implement. Gladwell reflects on the process in Iowa as a universal description of how change occurs:

First, a handful of *Innovators*, the adventurous ones will give something a try.

Next a slightly larger group experiments.

They are called the *Early Adopters*.

They represent the opinion leaders in the community, the respected, thoughtful people who watch and analyze what those wild Innovators are doing and then follow suit.

Next comes a large group, called the *Early Majority* and then the *Late Majority*, the deliberate, skeptical mass, who would never try anything until the most respected of farmers had tried it first.

Finally, at the end, the *Laggards*, the most traditional of all, those who see no urgent reason to change.

From Ezekiel writing in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, to Paul writing just 60 years after Christ, to Malcolm Gladwell writing in 2000 to Karen Armstrong in 2010 we find a common refrain.

Change happens.

I believe that God expects us to be innovators – those who continually seek to find ways to make the world a better place.

God has created us with the potential to build his Kingdom on earth and we must define what our portion of that work will be.

Our scripture today, as well as the chapter from *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* could be the charge for our meeting next month when we set about answering the question, “What is God calling this church to do?”

We will explore our strengths and our challenges.

We will take a look at trends in the community and discern where we can have the greatest impact.

I invite you to start thinking about these questions.

Take time in the next few weeks to envision the church 5 years from now. What do you see?

How will we be different?

In what ways do you hope that we will be transformed?

I invite you to think outside the box.

Let your dreams take over.

Give yourself the opportunity to imagine a world that reflects God's love of us and our love of God.

Allow Henri Nouwen's words to help you shift your context of how you see the world:

When God took on flesh in Jesus Christ, the uncreated and the created, the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human became united. This unity meant that all that is mortal now points to the immortal, all that is finite now points to the infinite. In and through Jesus all creation has become like a splendid veil, through which the face of God is revealed to us.