

Sunday, September 30, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Whose Fault is It?”

The very best teachers are those who make us think.

I can look back over my own educational experiences and name those teachers who taught me how to think – not how to answer questions, or regurgitate facts – but those who honed the skill of critical thinking.

Their techniques ranged from Socratic questioning, to challenging and debate.

Some used descriptive storytelling to make their point.

Others resorted to blatant exaggeration.

A good teacher guides you in developing the ability to articulate what you believe.

In today’s gospel Jesus, the master teacher, employs a number of effective teaching techniques to get his point across.

In the beginning of the passage John is trying to win the favor of the teacher by describing what he believes to be his laudable behavior on behalf of their movement.

However, as often happens when someone is trying to “brown-nose” the teacher, John exposes himself as not understanding the lesson.

Jesus gently corrects him with words that have been grossly misinterpreted throughout history,

“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Jesus is letting the disciples know that a person who is doing good things, helping others, offering a drink of water to those who are thirsty, is acting in a life-giving way.

As long as the person is not doing something to harm others, Jesus says to let him be.

Too often, this statement has been misused as “Whoever is not for us is against us,” creating a climate of conflict and bigotry.

There is a distinct difference in these two interpretations.

Jesus’ message is that our enemies, or those with whom we have a disagreement, are limited to those who have taken action against us.

Everyone else is a potential follower.

The misinterpreted lesson creates a dangerous paradox wherein you are either in or out – no middle ground – no potential for transformation.

When this approach is adopted we eliminate the opportunity to learn from people who are different from us.

We cut off debate.

We silence the opposition by closing our ears, our minds and our hearts to other people.

This interpretation is rooted in fear.

Fear of anything or anyone different than us.

This fear diminishes us.

It turns us away from God and away from our brothers and sisters from whom we might learn something.

When you eliminate the opposition by destroying them you are left with a homogeneous group – everyone is the same, thinks alike and sometimes even looks alike.

This dangerous behavior, exhibited throughout history, is pervasive in our election process this year.

From local town hall meetings to the national stage, partisan behavior has effectively silenced debate and precluded critical thinking.

Candidates and elected officials are using messages of derision and hate rather than articulating what they believe, or what they hope to accomplish.

This type of exchange lacks integrity.

We need to be able to coexist with people who have differing opinions and ideas.

There is almost never only one right way to do something.

Jesus' point is that as long as no one is being harmed – which is of course subjective, let them be.

Better yet, try to learn from them – to see what might be good in their work.

In 1914 Robert Frost wrote a poem that addressed this human inclination toward divisions.

In “Mending Wall” he tells the story of two neighbors who meet every year to repair the stonewall that divides their property. The most memorable line is “Good fences make good neighbors” which is often used to support separation and division

The actual poem, however, tells a different story.

Listen carefully:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

*That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.*

He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head:

'Why do they make good neighbors?

Isn't it where there are cows?

But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offense.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,

But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather

He said it for himself. I see him there

Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,

Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

He will not go behind his father's saying,

And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

This story is a deep reflection on why the one neighbor wants to maintain a boundary that is unnecessary.

The poet ponders what forces are out there that conspire to have the wall crumble and why is it important that the wall be maintained?

This story is also about neighbors coming together to build something in a ritual that fosters community.

It is not about the importance of maintaining distinct boundaries.

It is about working together, until our fingers are rough.

It is about two neighbors coming together with a purpose.

The wall functions as a metaphor, indicating the necessity of simultaneous connection and separation between human beings.

Although individuals long to connect with one another, a connection that is too close or boundaries that are indistinct can be dangerous.

Yet, disruption of these boundaries is probably inevitable, since the “frozen-ground-swell” that damages the wall, though it occurs annually, is never observed.

The neighbors can only maintain their relationship through conscious attention to the wall that separates them.

The poet’s intent, misconstrued over time, is not to exclude his neighbor, but to honor him.

In today’s gospel, Jesus invites us to think deeply about our thoughts and actions.

He reminds his disciples that they alone have the power to control their own behavior.

Using decidedly exaggerated language – he instructs them to take control of their own lives by eliminating temptations for sin.

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; and if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; and if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out for it is better to enter life maimed, lame and with one eye than to be thrown into hell.”

This is a holy invitation to transformation.

It is also a call for personal responsibility.

If you cause yourself to sin – it is your fault. Own it.

Jesus is letting us know that we can move beyond our mistakes, beyond bad habits to a new beginning.

In Christ, we can be made new.

We need not be afraid of people who are different or who disagree with us.

We do not need to set up false boundaries to keep people out.

We do not have to blame someone else when we have made a mistake.

We have been invited into the Kingdom where each person has a little something – a seasoning – a spice – some salt that makes them unique.

The beauty of salt is that it transforms everything it touches, but it is invisible.

Such is the call to Christian life. Life is changed, enhanced, made better – but done in humility.

In the kingdom of God, we are all connected.

God created each and every living creature – he breathed life into every being.

He did not say, “Well, I will put my favorite people in Salisbury, CT and those less-favored in sub-Saharan Africa.

No – God created us all and his expectation for us, I believe, is that we would work with our neighbors, meet them at the wall each Spring, and celebrate our commonality as well as our differences.

My friends, we are called to listen deeply to one another – to listen for the whole story.

When we turn to scripture we avail ourselves of the best possible teacher.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to identify areas in our lives that need transformation.

We are called to believe that God’s grace is available to all and that each and every one of us is capable of new beginnings.

Let us pray.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we turn to you this day seeking new beginnings in our lives. Help us to let go of past hurts and move into a future that is bright with the promise of your love. Grant us the grace, dear God, to change those behaviors in our lives that turn us away from you. Help us to open our hearts and our minds so that we may trust that your love for us is capable of sustaining us through all hardship and worry.

We thank you, God for the gift of your beloved son, Jesus Christ. We celebrate the movement of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. Help us God to go to the wall and greet our neighbor, to work until our fingers are rough to build your kingdom on earth. Be with us this day, and all days as we turn to you with our prayers.

We lift up those close to our hearts that you may bestow a healing touch. We pray for Theresa, Don, Gloria, Kit, Maryclare, Warren, Michelle, Peter, Jean, Harriet.

We pray for Michael’s family that your comfort will lessen their grief.

We pray for all those whose lives are affected by violence and war. We pray for those who dedicate their lives to peace – protecting us and keeping us safe.

We pray for those among us who suffer from anxiety, depression, loneliness and fear. Grant, dear God, peace in their hearts that they may know your love.

We turn to you now, in the silence of the sacred space as you listen for the prayers of our hearts.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray in these words...