

Sunday, September 7, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Remember, Restore, Renew”

Anita Diamant, author of The Red Tent once said, "It is terrible how much has been forgotten, which is why, I suppose, remembering seems a holy thing."

Remembering.

Is it a holy thing?

Yesterday I attended two interment services – gatherings of families who were burying the ashes of people whom they had loved.

Each group spent time remembering loved ones and sharing those memories with each other.

It was indeed a holy moment.

It is by remembering that we honor those who came before us.

Henri Nouwen reminds us “As we grow older we have more and more people to remember, people who have died before us.

It is very important to remember those who have loved us and those we have loved.

Remembering them means letting their spirits inspire us in our daily lives.

They can become part of our spiritual communities and gently help us as we make decisions on our journeys.

Parents, spouses, children, and friends can become true spiritual companions after they have died.

Sometimes they can become even more intimate to us after death than when they were with us in life.

Remembering the dead is choosing their ongoing companionship.”

I fear that we are not particularly good at remembering.

As I read the news I can’t help but see the threads of history that are repeated time and time again.

Much of what we do when we gather in church is to remember.

We come to be reminded of God’s steadfast love – to hear the stories of God’s people being saved by their faith.

We come to the communion table to remember Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

Today's Old Testament reading from Exodus helps us remember that our ancestor Moses was brave enough to speak truth to power and it changed everything.

It reminds us that even an apparently weak person can be empowered through God's love to stand up against an oppressive, overwhelming authority.

I think that remembering – sharing our stories – is foundational to the building of a strong community.

Community is the place where we come to practice the values that we profess.

In today's gospel reading Jesus provides what might be seen as a difficult protocol for truth telling and forgiveness in the church community.

When he suggests that you go and point out someone's fault, he is not suggesting that you go around criticizing people.

He is suggesting that you adopt a commitment to honesty and forthrightness.

Rather than harboring resentment or worse yet, gossiping about someone's transgressions Jesus wants you and I to be open and clear about our feelings.

And...he wants us to keep working at it until we get to the point of reconciliation.

If someone doesn't listen to you, try again with a few more people to back you up.

If that doesn't work, bring it to the community.

If that doesn't work, treat them as you would a Gentile or a tax collector – wait a minute, what does that mean?

Jesus reached out with love to the Gentiles and he called a tax collector, Matthew, to be one of his disciples.

Jesus' point is that we must always endeavor to build relationship – regardless of how difficult it might be.

We are meant; we are created to be in relationship – to live our lives in community.

While community is of utmost importance for Jesus he is realistic that where "two or three are gathered" in his name there will be two or three opinions of how the church should function or how others in the congregation should behave.

Anthony Robinson points out that the aim of the process Jesus outlines is to restore relationship not simply to render judgment.

The aim is to "regain that one."

While the idea of bringing others along, even processing the matter before the community, is challenging, it honors both parties.

Bringing everything to the light, speaking the truth in love and airing our differences is what makes communities rich, diverse and meaningful.

It's also a reminder that we cannot go about participating in God's mission in the world alone, in a vacuum or in our own silo.

Only when we can truly come together with open hearts, minds and souls can we move forward past our own baggage to reveal God's desire for reconciliation with all of creation.

When we have successfully reconciled with our neighbor, a story is created.

A narrative that is shared by the community.

Part of our remembering is recounting the ways that our ancestors, or relatives, or friends dealt with problems, adversities, and challenges.

How often have you recounted for your children a story about someone in your family who overcame adversity to succeed in some way?

We love these stories.

Last month, at the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Reservation in South Dakota a group of Lakota elders revived the tradition of a *Chief's Ride*.

This multi-day event brought together young and old members of the community to celebrate their shared heritage.

On the first day elders gathered to pair young people with a horse appropriate for their riding ability.

Many of the young people know how to ride, but they don't necessarily own their own horses.

Horses were brought in from a local ranch for the young people's use.

That evening, there was a community meal followed by a campfire and drum circle where three men chanted an ancient refrain.

The ride participants spent the night under the stars or in a teepee.

In the morning, they shared breakfast, broke camp and set out to ride together to the various cemeteries on the Reservation.

At each cemetery one of the elders shared the stories of the chiefs who were buried there.

This is the way that the Lakota community shares their oral history.

The Lakota people are working hard to restore their sense of community.

They have started by remembering, which is meant to restore a sense of belonging and renew the vitality necessary to keep their culture and their values alive for generations to come.

Remembering is vital to a community's identity.

Reconciliation is vital to a community's health.

We are called by God to dedicate ourselves to the building, nurturing, sustaining and cultivating of this Christian community.

What part will you play this year?

Welcome back. Welcome home.