

Sunday, September 14, 2014

Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Belonging, Behaving, Believing”

If you had a choice, would you rather see your ‘enemies’ wiped out in a flood of sea water or transformed into friends and sitting at your table?

The choice might seem extreme, but today’s readings ask us this question.

The parting of the Red Sea is one of those tough Bible stories to tell children.

On one hand it has the dramatic effect of God extending his right hand and parting the sea to save the Israelites, but on the other hand it has all those Egyptians buried alive in the mud and the water.

These are some of the challenges that we see in the international conflicts that are occurring all over the world.

Is it okay to kill innocent civilians – sometimes children – to ‘get’ the bad guys?

A few days ago we acknowledged the anniversary of the terrorist attacks on our country.

There is perhaps no event – certainly in my lifetime – that challenged our ability to be a forgiving people.

The loss of innocent lives was only exacerbated by the incredible breach of our sense of safety and security.

Everything changed.

As a nation, we continue to struggle with the biases that grew out of that event.

Now, today, we find ourselves facing yet another war situation as our country prepares to send resources and personnel to the Middle East to try and stem the tide of violence gripping that region.

What is the right thing to do?

How should we respond to stories of rape and torture, slavery and unspeakable violence?

When I find myself faced with these types of difficult questions I tend to turn to scripture.

In scripture failure and defeat rarely have the last word.

God specializes in taking the least likely, the most dysfunctional, the chief tormentor, and through the grace miracle of repentance and forgiveness gives them pivotal parts to play in his divine drama.

The old cleche, “What would Jesus do?” carries some weight.

In today's reading from Matthew Jesus makes his position pretty clear.

Forgiveness doesn't just happen once, it has to happen over and over again.

Receiving forgiveness from someone, receiving forgiveness from God, places you in debt to offer the same grace to another person.

Jesus raises the bar and creates the original idea of 'pay it forward.'

Jesus said, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man!

This is not easy and we must be certain that we do not confuse forgiveness with condoning behavior that we find reprehensible.

Forgiveness is offered when you can approach someone with a clean heart.

Perhaps all you can do is pray for someone. Perhaps the best that we can do in today's situation is to pray for our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, that they might find peace.

When we pray – it is not just for the people 'on our side.' We must pray for all of the people caught in this web of violence.

We can't ignore that Jesus calls us to be peacemakers – *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.*

How do you feel about the servant who gets a pardon and then bullies his debtor?

I frankly, don't want this servant in my community – this person who thinks that there are certain rules for him but that they don't apply to everyone else.

I don't want to be in relationship with a person who doesn't even know that they have been blessed.

When we pray our prayer of confession we end with asking God for mercy, forgiveness and grace.

I want to be around people who understand that without that – without God's mercy, forgiveness and grace – we are toast.

We might as well be the Egyptians, stuck in the mud, underwater.

Last week I started a course of study for my Doctorate in Ministry at Hartford Seminary.

I was drawn to this program because Hartford Seminary is noted for their work on interreligious dialogue.

They prepare people to be peacemakers.

Our first assignment was to read *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* by Robert Putnam and David Campbell (if you borrowed my copy of this book, please bring it back).

This tome of a book reviews all of the recent scholarship on religion and culture and seeks to explain the changes that are taking place in the American church.

The authors concluded that America is indeed a religious country with high rates of the 3 B's of religiosity: belonging, behaving and believing.

People report belonging to a church, whether or not they actually go or participate in the life of the church;

We want to belong to a place where people share our beliefs and behave according to a set of stated values.

We believe in a loving God – not the God of judgment and spite.

So if this is what we want, what do we have to do to make it real?

Belonging, behaving and believing.

By virtue of walking through the doors of this Meetinghouse this morning, you belong here.

God has brought you to this place so that you might feel his presence and be moved by his holy spirit.

Believing is an important aspect of community.

Of course, everyone is not expected to believe the same thing, but you are expected to explore your beliefs, attempt to articulate them and then to live by them.

Behaving is simply another word for being true to your values.

How you act tells the story of who you are.

You cannot say that you believe one thing and then act another way – the action always trumps the words – just ask a child.

We come together, in community to work on this.

Dr. Bill Wilson, founder of Center for Healthy Churches says:

“Perhaps one of the most important lessons we can learn and re-learn in the midst of this era of conflict is that God is in the business of turning hopeless situations into triumphs, of turning our failures into His success, of shining light into darkness, and of bringing life from death. The Bible bears witness to the powerful truth of redemption.

To participate requires that we acknowledge our shortcomings, humbly repent, and then avail ourselves of his grace. When we do, then we, too, can be part of bringing good from evil, light from darkness, and life from death.”

I came upon a beautiful poem by Andrew King that captures my thoughts on our current situation:

THE COMMUNITY THAT LIES BETWEEN

Somewhere between what is and what will be, between this present world and a world redeemed,

somewhere between the world of resentment and rage and a world at peace, sharing fullness of life,

somewhere on the journey to the yet-to-come lies the community of love in Christ,

where brother and sister meet one another as equals in the sight of God, where the joys of one are the joys of all, the concerns of one are concerns of all, where acceptance is given and received

yet also where views will painfully diverge, where desires will differ and divide; where our human faults will hurt and harm, where we fracture along fault-lines of pride.

We are redeemed yet remain imperfect, united in Christ yet individuals to the end.

And so we need a little help in our community of hope: we need the reminder that where even two of us meet, Christ is there, our Saviour, in our midst.

And his are the words that can lead to healing, that guide us to seek reconciliation, that nudge us toward God's peace.

Unity begins with acceptance, builds on hope, is nourished by caring, grows stronger through celebration.

But unity also can require hard work, the work of listening to one another's story, hearing one another's pain, granting one another forgiveness – and for that we are given God's grace.

Therefore somewhere between what is and what will be, between this present world and a world redeemed,

somewhere on the journey to the yet-to-come lies our community of love in Christ.

May we model to the world, so fractured, that community gathered at his table.

May we model to a world so in need of healing his presence among us to save.

Amen.