

Sunday, October 2, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "Thou Shall Love Yourself"

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Well, that seems pretty clear to me. What more can I possibly add to these simple instructions?

Loving God with your total being is the foundation on which to build love of neighbor and love of self.

For when we surrender our lives to God, we free ourselves to be compassionate beings.

Compassion, according to Karen Armstrong, "requires us all day and every day to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there."

Let's explore how we might do that.

Let's start with the end – Love Yourself.

This may seem like a contradiction – dethrone yourself and love yourself.

But this is exactly what we want to do.

We want to become comfortable with who we are so that we might feel free to offer oneself to others.

This is a difficult instruction in a society where we are constantly reminded of our shortcomings.

There are countless messages that assail us each day about how we could be better, smarter, prettier, skinnier, richer, stronger.

I love the illustration that Armstrong uses of the eight-year-old boy in Nazi Germany, "bewildered and distressed by the vicious anti Semitic propaganda that assailed him on all sides."

One night he deliberately lay awake and made a list of all his good qualities.

He told himself firmly that he was not what the Nazis said, that he had talent and special gifts of heart and mind, which he enumerated to himself one by one.

Finally, he vowed that if he survived, he would use those qualities to build a better world."

How often do you review your good qualities?

How often do you list your deficiencies?

Now, no one is perfect and we all have different gifts and talents, as well as faults.

We can, however, choose to focus our energies on the celebration of those gifts.

We can take a hard look at ourselves and say – this is my gift and this is how I will use it to make the world a better place.

At the same time we can look at our faults (or the faults of others) and say, “these are the things that I must overlook, compensate for, or determine to change.”

It starts with understanding and loving yourself.

Each morning, when you look in the mirror you must see yourself as a beloved child of God, created in the image of your Creator.

If we are created in the image of God, what’s not to like?

Just like the little boy in Nazi Germany, too often we listen to the voices of others in deciding that we are not worthwhile.

Whose voice do you hear when you are criticizing yourself?

What is the root of your insecurities?

To whom have you given power in your life to define who you are?

All of these self-searching questions are the root – the developmental work that must take place to develop the capacity for compassion.

Our third step in building a compassionate life is “Compassion for Yourself.”

Armstrong points out “before we can make friends with others, we have to make a friend of our own self.”

We must believe that we have something to offer our neighbor before we reach out.

I think that Jesus is a perfect example of this.

Jesus goes about his ministry with complete confidence in the work he is doing.

He eats with whomever he wants;

he speaks truth to power with little regard for social or political protocol. He accepts his friends for who they are.

He gently encourages his followers to look at things in new ways, without judging.

Once in a while he uses derogatory phrases like, “you stiff-necked vipers” but overall, he is compassionate in his advocacy for change.

One of the interesting points made by Armstrong in today’s chapter is “We often attack other people for precisely those qualities that we most dislike in ourselves.”

This gives me pause.

She talks about fear as an underlying cause of hatred and bigotry. She asks us to examine what it is that we are afraid of?

This is a challenge because I think we most often avoid the things or people of whom we are afraid.

We simply design our lives so that they are not included.

Armstrong pushes us to go there.

Let’s apply these lessons to our life here in the church.

First, take a moment and make that list of all our great qualities.

Then, think about how we might use those gifts to transform the world to a more compassionate place.

Now think for a moment about what stands in the way of doing this?

What are we afraid of? What causes us to suffer?

According to Armstrong: “Being forced into proximity with what we hate is suffering; being separated from what we love is suffering, not getting what we want is suffering.”

Let’s use our imaginations a bit.

One of our greatest strengths is our sense of community.

People genuinely care for one another and we like to think that we are a welcoming congregation.

So what if we figured out a way to reach young people and get them excited about being part of a faith community?

What if dozens of young people started coming to church?

What if they had tattoos and piercings and wore clothes that were sloppy and torn?

What if they got on all the committees and changed the way things are done?

What if they took over the music and replaced the organ with electric guitars?

Armstrong warns us “our own egotism gravely limits our view of the world, which we see through the distorting screen of our personal desires and needs. We are” she says “often the cause of our own misery.”

She suggests four steps to help us develop the ability to turn outward and embrace our neighbor.

First, begin by “drawing on the warmth of friendship that you know exists potentially in your mind and direct it to yourself.” Notice, she suggests, “how much you need and long for loving friendship.”

Next, “become conscious of your own anger, fear and anxiety.” Examine the roots of your own hostilities and “gently put aside your current irritations, frustrations, and worries.” Feel compassion for yourself.

Then, “bring your capacity for joy to the surface and take conscious pleasure in things we take for granted: good health, family, friends, work and life’s tiny pleasures.” This is what I would call the ‘count your blessings’ phase.

Finally, Armstrong says, look at yourself with even-mindedness, nonattachment.” Step outside yourself and recognize that you have failings – as do all of us; but you also have gifts and talents to share.

You deserve compassion, joy, friendship and love, as much as everyone else.

By developing a compassionate heart, like Jesus, we avail ourselves of the opportunity of getting to know and understand people who are different from ourselves.

Going back to the great commandment, we can recognize that if we love ourselves, we are then free to love our neighbor.

In loving our neighbor we are able to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul.

This means that God is at the center of our lives.

It means that God is our first and last thought.

Love of God governs all of our interactions.

Let this be our prayer today.