

Sunday, October 23, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "Be Doers of the Word"

In recent weeks, I have been a part of several conversations where people have endeavored to explain to me that they remain outside of a church community because they are “spiritual, not religious.”

One fifth of the people in our country define themselves this way. There is a website dedicated to *SBNR*'s which identifies itself as serving the global population of individuals who walk a spiritual path outside traditional religion.

In August this year Reverend Lillian Daniel commented on this phenomena in her online column. She said:

“Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

This resonates with me.

I chose the scripture passage from the letter of James today because I think it clearly addresses one of the key problems that the church faces today.

James is urging his followers to recognize that God is our source of life. He says, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”

He encourages his community to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.

I acknowledge that the traditional church, shunned by so many in our society, went through a period of time when there were too many hearers and not enough doers.

We have, over time, become somewhat complacent in bearing witness to the power of God in our lives.

We have cultivated a society where people do not talk about their faith for fear of offending someone who believes otherwise.

Well, my friends, I think that if we are afraid to talk about what God does in our lives; if we are hesitant to credit God with the beauty that surrounds us; when we offer our thanks to any power other than God, we are on a path to empty churches.

Being doers of the word does not mean that we earn God's favor by working hard.

Being “doers” means that, like Moses, we live our lives dedicated to serving God's will.

Each and every action is rooted in a love of Jesus Christ.

Evelyn Underhill describes it this way.

“For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of his reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of his will.”

Anchored in God.

When James says: Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” he is sending us a clear message.

As we endeavor to build our compassionate community – it is the doing that transforms the world.

We can be individually transformed, internally transformed – like the people who claim to be spiritual – but to transform the world – we have to act, and that action has to take place in community.

It takes concrete work to build the kingdom of God.

Being a good person, by yourself, is not enough.

You are created, you are called to be an active person.

Martin Luther didn’t like the book of James because he thought that it watered down our theology.

There is little mention of Jesus, no mention of the cross or the resurrection – not even grace.

Luther was afraid that the book of James was too vague in its message.

I disagree. I think that James is startlingly clear.

He knows exactly what he is saying.

Religion, faith, is more than showing up at church.

To be true Christians we must live according to our values and that must be obvious to others.

Armstrong’s sixth step toward a compassionate life is “Action.”

She recommends that we start out with one small act of kindness, noting that such simple efforts can transform lives.

She encourages us to try and create ‘spots of time’ for others that may seem little, nameless and unremembered but that will have a lasting impact.

She reminds us that a simple gesture can deeply affect another person and equally as powerful, an offhand remark or criticism can wound.

Building on last week’s step, Mindfulness, she says,

“We need to become aware that our impulsive words and actions have consequences that we could never have foreseen.”

This reminded me of two particular memories from my own life.

In high school, I was a good student, but certainly did not work as hard as I could have.

When I was making plans for college my guidance counselor, Mr. MacFarland, said to me, “I don’t expect that you will amount to much. You are not a hard worker. I think that you should consider joining the service, maybe you could be a nurse.”

I was stunned and hurt by his remark and remember it often. Perhaps he was trying to motivate me with his negativity, but it wounded me deeply.

At the same time, I had a very demanding Economics teacher. On the day the National Honor Society candidates were announced she said to me, “Diane, I am surprised not to see your name on the Honor Society list.”

I said, “Oh Mrs. Wilder, I am not a very good student.” And she said, “Yes, Diane you are.”

These two exchanges have stayed with me for almost 40 years. Both exchanges were brief and to the point, but powerful.

Words have power.

Small acts of kindness and recognition have power.

Armstrong insists

“we are not doomed to an existence of selfishness because we have the ability, with disciplined, repetitive action to construct new habits of thought, feeling, and behavior.”

She recommends three steps to changing our impulsive way of thinking and reacting.

First, make a resolution to act once every day in accordance with the positive version of the Golden Rule: *Treat others as you wish to be treated yourself.*

Second, Resolve each day to fulfill the negative version of the Golden Rule: *Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.*

Third, *Make an effort once a day to change your thought patterns.* Make an effort to do these three things each day, first consciously and eventually it will become your automatic response.

Kindness and gratitude will become a part of who you are.

This is exactly what James is calling his followers to do.

Be conscious of what you are doing and why.

When you look in the mirror, remember who you are and whose you are.

Stay attuned to that throughout the day.

Again, quoting Evelyn Underhill

“Most of our conflicts and difficulties come from trying to deal with the spiritual and practical aspects of our life separately instead of realizing them as parts of one whole. If our practical life is centered on our own interests, cluttered up by possessions, distracted by ambitions, passions, wants and worries, beset by a sense of our own rights and importance, or anxieties for our own future, or longings for our own success, we need not expect that our spiritual life will be a contrast to this. The soul’s house is not built on such a convenient plan.”

My friends, we are created by God –sustained by his love.

The gift of our lives is acknowledged in our service to others.

We are made to be doers.

I urge you to be active in your faith.

Let your light shine brightly in the world.

Our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith concludes with these words of promise:

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,

to be your servants in the service of others,

to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil,

to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,

to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you

Forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace

Courage in the struggle for justice and peace,

Your presence in trial and rejoicing,

And eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessings and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.
