

Sunday, October 26, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Go Deep”

I would imagine that Jesus is getting a little irritated at this point.

The Pharisees have been following him around for days peppering him with questions designed to trip him up.

Do you know what that feels like?

Have you ever encountered a person who believes they are superior to you in some way and to show it they ask you something they think you don't know?

They use their questions as a tool to belittle you.

If you admit that you don't know, they are almost gleeful in their response: “Really, I was quite certain you would know that.”

The Pharisees uncomfortably recognize Jesus' parables as speaking about them.

Feeling offended and disrespected and perhaps threatened, they fight back with the only weapons they have: their learning, and their way with words.

The leaders taunting Jesus keep thinking they have found the right question to trick him but Jesus keeps responding with profound answers.

From these spirited exchanges we get the benefit of some of the clearest theology in scripture.

In answering today's question, “What is the most important law?” Jesus avoids diminishing the importance of the Torah by incorporating all those 600 plus laws into two commandments known as the Great Commandment:

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.

These are the super commandments – everything else hangs on these.

This is really all you need to know to be a person of faith.

The Scriptures speak of love as the end of the law.

When we have learned to love as Christ did, we have no need for law, because we will automatically seek the best for those around us, which means we will never do anything deliberately to hurt another person.

This love is not just a warm feeling inside.

It is a way of being and acting, no matter what we may feel.

Everything that you do in life can be measured against this metric.

So how do we do that?

First, we start with self-examination. We look deeply into our own hearts, souls and minds and discern our own motivation for the way we act.

We ask ourselves hard questions, perhaps uncomfortable questions, about how we treat people, how we make decisions, what our priorities are.

We probe.

We go deep.

History has shown us that many great people find their love of God when they distance themselves from the noise of their everyday life.

I learned this week that the apostle Paul spent three years in solitude in Arabia after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road.

I'm not sure why I didn't know this – it is clearly stated in Galatians 1:17, but I didn't.

The essay I read that included this fact suggests that *“Paul came back a different man. He left a zealot and returned a theologian. He left filled with raw enthusiasm, and returned with passion for the Kingdom. He left shrouded by doubt and returned grounded in conviction. It seems clear that while in Arabia, Paul went deep.”*

Theresa of Avila, Thomas Merton, Augustine – all prominent spiritual leaders who spent time away to discover what God's love truly meant to them.

In this crazy world of war, climate change, poverty, economic crisis and dread diseases, love may appear to be powerless and irrelevant.

But, when love is lived as Jesus did – practically, sacrificially, passionately and justly – it speaks directly to the root causes of our struggles.

One author pointed out “Ultimately all of our dealings in the world will grow out of one of two sources: fear or love”

If fear is the primary driver of our lives, we will ensure we have more than enough weaponry, physical or emotional, to protect us and we will easily attack any person or country we perceive as a threat.

If fear is our foundation, we will hoard our wealth, and we will grab what we can with little concern for the impact on others or on our environment.

When fear is our foundation, we will tend to minimize care and compassion for those who are unrelated to us or different from us.

But, when love is our foundation, everything changes.

Love drives us to seek connection and understanding.

Love drives us to share what we have so that all may have their needs met.

Love leads us to think carefully about how we treat our environment and how we use our resources, and how we deal with those who are suffering, even if they are unrelated to us.

Authentic love recognizes the connections and interdependence between all people and between us and our world.

The Connecticut Conference has chosen this type of love, interdependence, as the theme of their work for the year ahead.

Authentic love is the most desperately needed, and most powerful, solution to the tough struggles of our time.

Inter-religious conflict and misunderstanding can only be addressed with love and respect for our neighbors.

The challenge is whether we are prepared to embrace love, to live love, to preach love and to work to spread love throughout the world.

We must allow love to be the primary force in our lives.

Love of God, neighbor and self must inform our voting, our ethics, our morality, our social participation and our interactions.

When we embrace this we will discover that, little by little, the world will begin to shift to a more peaceful place.

This feels like it should be common sense, but love is rarely suggested as a strategy for engaging other people in our communities and neighborhoods.

There is never a shortage of opportunities to express the kind of authentic love that Jesus practiced.

I read a beautiful story in the New York Times on Thursday called “Finding Light in China’s Darkness.” The author, Yan Lianke reflects on growing up in a sad, dark China and worries that little has changed.

He said, “Life is gloomy and depressing. Everyone is waiting for something dreadful to happen. This uneasy and fearful expectation has produced a collective sense of anxiety.”

His response to this is to bring light and love into the darkness through his writing.

“I don’t pretend that I have been uniquely selected by God, as Job was, to endure suffering, but I do know that I am somehow fated to perceive darkness. From these shadows I lift my pen to write. I search for love, goodness and a perpetually beating heart.”

Within our own homes and families, if we prioritize showing love, we will discover deepened relationships, higher commitment levels, and the kind of self-giving that enables us to navigate whatever conflicts may arise.

In our church, when love becomes the primary framework within which we engage each other, we will find ourselves learning from one another, celebrating our differences and making space for the needs of others.

In this environment, small conflicts become less important and are much easier to navigate.

When love is the driver of our ministry together, the surrounding community will inevitably feel and notice the difference.

As we embark together on our 270th year of being the church in this community, let us make a commitment to *love the lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind and love our neighbors as ourselves.*

Let us pray with a poem called *A Love So Strong*

We thank You, God,

for a love so strong,

That You would fashion a universe

place within it a world,

and give life to creatures

so that You could have someone to love.

That You would confront the worst that people can do

and conquer

without drawing any blood

but Your own.

That You would breathe Your Spirit into what You made,

allowing human hands to share

in building

Your life and purpose in the world.

That You would live in that which You created,

and inspire love for You in our hearts,

so that when we take the time to look

we would find you in each other

and share the love we have found in You.

Grant us the grace, O God to follow your commands and to live our lives with you at our center.

Help us to 'go deep' to discern how we might best serve you in the world.

Hear our prayers this day for those whom we love.

For those who are sick, we pray for healing.

For those who mourn, we pray for comfort.

For those whose lives are marred by violence, poverty, disease and fear we pray that your peace might find a way to their hearts.

O God, lover of all that is good, hear our prayers as we turn to you in the sacred silence of this Meeting House....