

October 30, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - “Institutional Integrity”

I found myself this week reflecting on the word ‘civil.’

There has been much lamenting over the lack of *civil* discourse in this year’s election.

I have heard several references to the current political divide in our country as having the makings of a *civil* war.

I started thinking about *Zachaeus* as a *civil* servant.

Civil is an adjective that has ten different dictionary definitions, which means that everyone might not be talking about the same thing.

The definition of *civil* that resonated with me is “of, relating to, or consisting of citizens.”

A few weeks ago I offered a definition of culture as ‘the way a community chooses to order their lives.’

The key concepts for me are citizens – members of a community and choice – how the gathered citizens decide to conduct themselves.

A good part of our lives are organized around institutions: schools, church, government, hospitals.

We expect that institutions will be there for us.

We love to rail against institutions, saying they are too controlling or invasive in our lives, but where would we be without them?

Institutions are the foundation on which a civil society operates.

They are the hallmark of a participatory community.

Institutions are ongoing - built on the shoulders of those who came before us and entrusted to us for the generations yet to come.

I heard Wendell Berry speak last week and he made the point that to save the earth, we must learn how to develop affection for place and then pass that affection onto to subsequent generations.

I would apply this same premise to honoring and respecting the institutions that support us.

We must love them and pass that love on to those who come after us.

Our institutional life requires investment of time and money and passion.

We will only have democracy as long as people vote and honor the outcome of those votes.

We will only have schools as long as people pay their taxes, so that all children have access to education.

We will only have church as long as you participate – you are the lifeblood of this institution.

Without you, the gathered community, there is no ‘church.’

This month marks the beginning of a yearlong celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

Five hundred years ago our ancestors were bold enough to stand up to the hierarchy of the established church and demand a church that would honor God and God’s word above all else.

The reformers did not set out to start a new church, rather they were calling the church that they loved to clarify what it stood for.

The reformers demanded that the church prioritize service to God and the reading and understanding of scripture over the building of cathedrals or the practice of paying ones’ way into heaven.

Our faith tradition has always been one of calling people’s attention to God’s action in our lives.

In 1620 when the Pilgrims were departing from Holland for new shores their pastor John Robinson provided this counsel:

If God should reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth of my ministry; for I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy word.

Martin Luther, John Robinson – both encouraging their followers to listen for God’s direction in their lives and open themselves to realize that God is always in motion.

God acts in ways that we might not expect – we must pay attention to God’s movement in our lives.

Jesus, inviting himself to dine with Zacheaus is a perfect example of this.

Zacheus was outside the accepted religious leadership.

He was a traitor – one who made his living by squeezing money out of people and keeping a percentage for himself.

Zacheaus was not a man of integrity.

Quite the opposite.

This is why Jesus chose him.

Jesus deliberately signaled out someone whom society wanted no part of.

Jesus reached out and said, “I’m going to have dinner with you.”

Imagine the personal appeal Jesus must have had for a man like Zachaeus to be moved to give away half of his fortune and repay his debts four times, just by having dinner.

(If I could imitate that we wouldn’t have to have an annual appeal.)

Jesus was signaling to the authorities that their focus on rules was not what God’s kingdom was supposed to look like.

He was sending a message that said, ‘In God’s kingdom every person is worth my attention and every person is eligible for God’s grace and forgiveness.’

Jesus was laying the groundwork for what would become a church devoted to those on the margins.

Now, 2,000 years after Jesus and 500 years after Martin Luther we are challenged to define what our church stands for.

Later this morning as we gather for our 272nd annual meeting we will face the difficult questions of who we are and what we stand for.

Our budget and our welcome statement are two vehicles for us to tell our story.

This weekend also marks the tenth anniversary of my ordination into Ministry in the United Church of Christ.

On October 29, 2006 I took my vows to faithfully serve the church, relying on God’s grace to guide and sustain me.

The Call to Worship of the ordination service said this:

We are called to work in this broken world ‘for such a time as this.’ The world desperately needs a word of justice and peace, a message of reconciliation, hope and healing, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We have so much to learn from each other and so much to share with the world.

Join us this day to praise God, to celebrate the love of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit among us.

Let us worship God together.

Ten years have gone by, though I can still feel the hands that laid upon my shoulders that day.

I remain committed to the institution of Christian ministry.

Earlier this week a colleague commented that though the church has changed, we as ministers were still called to lead toward an unknown future.

We may not know what the church of tomorrow looks like, but I am confident that people will always need a place to gather – a place to be noticed, to practice compassion and kindness;

People will always need a place to encounter the divine – to feel God’s presence, to seek God’s guidance;

People will always need to hear God’s holy word and to discern what it might be saying in their lives today.

In a little over a week we will come to the close of this presidential campaign.

The institution of our democracy will be tested and I pray that it will hold.

If we abandon our institutions, if we allow them to fall into decay, our lives will suffer.

A community without a foundation crumbles.

A belief system without merit falters.

A value system without credibility erodes.

We are called to be civil servants of Christ.

Jesus said, ‘come down from the tree, I am coming to your house.’

We must be ready.

Please join me in affirming our faith – turn to the back covers of your hymnals and let us declare together our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith:

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being,

Creates humankind in the divine image,

And sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,

To be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil,

To share in Christ's baptism and eat at this table,

To join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,

courage in the struggle for justice and peace,

the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

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