

Sunday, October 4, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon : “All Alone”

I have spent a lot of time this week thinking about relationships and community.

On Monday I gathered with the United Church of Christ clergy for the 306th annual General Association meeting.

We worshiped together, explored the challenges of ministry in today’s world and shared a meal.

The next day I worshiped and preached at Salisbury School to 300 adolescent boys at 8 am!

I focused on the importance building community where you are with the people available to you through acts of compassion.

Tuesday evening, I joined Joe as the Sharon Hospital staff welcomed new physicians to the community.

During the week I met with families planning weddings and memorial services – each family unique unto themselves with their own set of rituals and traditions.

I led worship at Geer Nursing Home, conducted a graveside service for Elizabeth Luria Moore and went to a birthday party celebrating 3 generations in one family.

Throughout the week I was a peripheral part of the Salisbury community’s grief over the death of Joey Sherwood – a young father who took his own life on Monday and then on Thursday, our church family’s loss of Richard Windeler.

Each situation that I encountered was unique and important.

The purpose of this recitation of my appointment calendar is to highlight that our lives are made up of relationships – a great variety of them – and that is exactly as God intended it to be.

God created us to be in relationship.

When God took a part of Adam – his rib – to create a companion, he knew what he was doing.

He knew that by creating a partner for man – one that was literally ‘a part of’ man, the two people would be linked for eternity.

I want to be certain that everyone understands that woman being crafted from man’s rib does not indicate any type of superiority or ownership of man over woman.

It could even be argued that man – lacking that rib – is actually a bit short of being complete.

God created both man and woman out of love – breathed life into them and has been sustaining us ever since with his amazing grace.

The relationships that are foundational to our communities – couples, extended families, children, friendships –are all gifts from God.

Just as God instructed that we must tend to the created earth, we must also tend to our relationships.

For many people in our society, community is elusive.

People can feel all alone in the midst of a crowded city.

People can feel alienated in their own families or neighborhoods for any number of reasons.

Senator Chris Murphy told a great story of compassion on an NPR program earlier this week.

He told of his 4-year old son Owen being befriended by another toddler at day care.

Owen was apprehensive about starting pre-k and reluctant to leave his parents and enter the classroom on his own.

On the second day of school another 4 year old, Oliver, stood by the door and welcomed Owen, easing the transition.

Each day after that Oliver waited for Owen and welcomed him to school.

Senator Murphy cited this story as an example of how one small act of generosity can impact someone else's life.

This type of caring lays the foundation for building relationships.

In our gospel story today Jesus is calling for this level of attentiveness.

When he condemns divorce he is addressing the hardening of one's heart – the turning away from commitments made, as well as responsibilities.

Divorce, in Jesus' time meant the loss of status for the woman-often left with no viable means of support.

Before you jump to conclusions about Jesus' edict on divorce, let me remind you that last week – in this same crowd, Jesus said to pluck out your eye if it is causing you to sin.

When the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce they are trying to trick him.

They know that no matter how he answers, part of the group will be offended. I am reminded of a saying I heard last week that 75% of the time worship will be exactly as you want it and the other 25% of the time, it will be exactly what someone else wants.

Jesus defers to the Genesis creation passage.

His point is that man and woman were created to be together.

When we overlay all of Jesus' other teachings we can understand that Jesus is calling people to be in kind, loving, gentle, humble relationships.

This is what our loving God wants for us.

This is why we were created – to be a part of each other's lives; to care for one another; to love our neighbor.

As I was thinking about these layering of relationships, the interconnectedness of our lives, I remembered an encyclopedia that my neighbors had when I was a child.

It was a big encyclopedia (you remember those) and one page had a drawing of the human body – in skeleton form.

There was a series of transparent pages that covered the drawing.

Each turned page added another dimension to the complex human form.

Finally, when all the pages were in place you could see the many systems of the body and imagine how they worked together.

This is the way our lives are.

Think about all of the connections that you have to people.

Some are deep and long-lasting; others brief – perhaps only a passing smile to the person you buy coffee from in the morning.

I was touched, recently, when my son said that before he left Brooklyn to move to San Diego, he stopped to say goodbye to the man who had sold him his coffee every morning for a year.

I'm not sure he even knew the man's name, but there was a relationship.

Jesus' point in all of his teachings, made especially clear in Mark's gospel, is that we must notice people and care about them.

We must heed God's direction from Genesis and tend to both the earth and all created beings.

I suggested to the boys at Salisbury School that the best way to build community was through acts of compassion.

All of our relationships might not be perfect and some of them may even end in divorce.

God knows that.

What God wants from us, and what Jesus is preaching to his disciples today is, honest, genuine, effort at living with hearts full of love for God and others.

Jesus sets the bar high – on all things, not just interpersonal relationships.

When we accept Jesus as our savior, we are committing to trying to live up to his ideals.

Last week we heard baptismal promises made on behalf of a baby – those promises are hard to live by day-by-day.

I officiated at several weddings this year and part of the joy that comes with that is the optimism of the young couples.

They do not enter into their marriages with a plan for divorce.

They begin their married lives professing their love and commitment to one another.

They endeavor to live up to the promises that they make.

We are reminded that our relationship with God is based on promises – on the covenant.

Whether baptismal promises or marriage vows – these are promises that we make in the presence of God and ought to be seen as sacred.

Living up to those promises is challenging.

No one is perfect and no one is able to emulate Jesus Christ all of the time – but we have to try.

We can acknowledge our own weaknesses, just as we can accept the weaknesses of others, but we must be cautious not to water down the gospel message to make it comfortable for us.

The good news is that God seems to be successful living up to his promises to us, as well as gracious in granting his forgiveness and mercy when we fall short.

Being a baptized Christian is hard work.

A good marriage is hard work.

Building a loving community is hard work.

Relationships – any kind – are hard work.

The question before us this morning is how hard are you willing to work?