

**Sunday, November 4, 2012**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Total Commitment”**

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I will start with saying that my deepest sympathy goes out to the millions of people impacted by Hurricane Sandy.

The devastation was monumental-but for us, here, it was a bit of a blessing.

For me, last week’s storm was a gift of time.

In my hectic, overscheduled world, I rarely get the opportunity to spend a whole day reading.

The storm and all of the cancellations and service interruptions created space for me to read a collection of essays, articles and books that people have passed along to me over the past few months.

My reverence for the written word runs deep and I was not disappointed.

What was perhaps most intriguing was the universal thread that ran through the different works.

I read about religion and gratitude, about creation and dependence, about love and disappointment, about Jesus and about Ruth.

In everything there was a yearning for oneness, for a spiritual presence that would provide comfort, peace and a sense of understanding.

Each of the authors, in very different voices, was seeking to provide answers to the age-old questions of humanity:

Why are we here? Who is our neighbor? What does God expect from us?

Unitarian preacher Galen Guengerich reflected that

“The greatest temptation we face is the temptation to disregard our utter dependence on the people and world around us.”

He argued “If the first principle of all existence is utter dependence, then the deadliest of all sins is the effort to negate or disregard that principle through the myth of self-sufficiency.”

Utter dependence – Interdependence.

We cannot survive without one another.

Sometimes I think we have things like hurricanes simply to remind us that there is a greater force than our own will and that there are some things that level the playing field.

An essay by Wendell Berry called “The Gift of Good Land” sent me on an exploration of this farmer-philosopher-poet’s writing.

He has authored almost two hundred works ranging from a commentary on food to a guide for Lenten devotions.

His theme throughout is honoring God, God’s gifts to us and one another. He wrote:

“How can you love your neighbor if you don’t know how to build or mend a fence, how to keep your filth out of his water supply and your poison out of his air; or if you do not produce anything and so have nothing to offer, or do not take care of yourself and so become a burden?”

Interdependence – what you need from me today, perhaps I will need from you tomorrow.

This theme is reiterated in today’s gospel.

When Jesus says,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” he is talking about a total commitment.

You cannot love God with your whole being and not be concerned about all of creation.

The love that Jesus speaks about here is not an emotion.

It is not just saying the words "I love you."

For Jesus, loving another person means to honor their value as human beings and their value to God, and to express this in actions of service, respect and kindness.

Love is always expressed in action.

Love requires true engagement with the other person.

It requires sensitivity, curiosity, interest, compassion, humility and a willingness to put ourselves out for the other person.

One author said, “Love is messy and unpredictable and costly.

But, love is also the only place where life can be found.”

In the Old Testament reading today we heard Ruth’s words, familiar to many as a choice reading at weddings.

Where you go, I will go;

where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die -  
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!"

Ruth is demonstrating complete love, total commitment.

She has little to gain from staying with Naomi, but her love holds her there.

She will have no power, no money and little chance at marriage but she makes a choice; a choice rooted in love, and she stays.

For Jesus, the guiding principle in all relationships is love - love of God and love of people.

Love is about honoring and respecting the other person, putting their needs first, and refusing deliberately to hurt them, even when it's costly.

This is the tough challenge of following Jesus, especially in today's world.

It is far easier to respond to anger with anger, to violence with violence, to hurt with hurt.

But, this only increases the cycle of hatred and misery.

It is only when we commit to love above all that we can bring peace, compassion and justice into our world.

This is not about doing "great acts" to change the world.

It's just about working to change our own hearts so that we live with kindness toward those around us - both friend and enemy.

Mother Theresa said, "Spread love everywhere you go....Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness."

This is what God expects of us. This is who we are. We are neighbors – to each other – to the world.

Back to Wendell Berry who said

“We must not use the world as if we created it ourselves. What is given is not ownership, but a sort of tenancy, the right of habitation and use. For the land is described as an inheritance; the community is understood to exist not just in space, but also in time. One lives in the neighborhood, not just of those who now live next door, but of the dead who have bequeathed the land to the living, and of the unborn to whom the living will in turn bequeath it.”

We are part of all of creation.

When God breathed life into our bodies and souls it was with the expectation that we would tend to the kingdom – tend to God’s creatures – our neighbors.

Jesus’ command is clear, Ruth’s example is stark – we belong to one another – we belong to God.

In reflecting on his faith Rev. Guengerich said:

“Religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation.

The feeling of awe emerges from our experience of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine.

This feeling becomes religious when a sense of obligation lays claim to us, and we feel a duty to the larger life that we share.

Religion begins as transcendence and then leads to discipleship.

We gather in this meetinghouse, at this communion table, to nourish our sense of awe and to be reminded that we have chosen to be disciples. So bring your sense of wonder to this table and prepare yourself to go out into the world as a dedicated disciple, spreading God’s love to each neighbor you meet.