

Sunday, November 1, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Oh, Now I Get It”

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.

Pretty much says it all – don't you think?

After weeks of trying to understand Jesus' clever metaphors and parables here we get a straight-forward instruction on what it means to be faithful.

Over the centuries, since these profound words were first uttered, we have somehow lost our way on this path.

We've gone through multiple cultural upheavals, and distorted interpretations.

Slowly, over the years, our sense of commitment to God and our concern for the well-being of our neighbor has eroded – diminished into one-hour a week attendance at worship.

This is not enough.

Jesus asked for all of you – heart, soul, mind and strength.

This means that your entire life – every moment – must be rooted in your faith.

All of your decisions, all of your relationships, everything you do and say ought to spring from your love of God.

This may sound like an overwhelming responsibility, but I promise you, it is in fact a liberating ideal.

When your life is controlled by a heart, soul and mind that are in congruence you are free to love both yourself and your neighbor.

God created us out of love and continues to sustain us with that love.

All God asks in return is that we share that love with the created world.

There are many ways to share that love.

One is compassion – caring about other people – walking with others on their journeys;

Another is respect – treating people as you would like to be treated.

Another is sharing resources.

Last week we passed a budget for next year that included a 1% increase in monies drawn from our endowment fund earmarked for benevolence.

There are two definitions here that I want to clarify.

First, an endowment fund is monies donated to the church over time that are invested to provide income via interest dividends and increased value.

Endowment funds are entrusted to each generation to be carefully stewarded to ensure the long-term sustainability of the church.

Technically, these are not ‘our’ funds – but funds entrusted to our care by our ancestors.

We are called to use them responsibly as we live out the mission of our church.

The second word that needs clarification is benevolence, which is an act of kindness, a charitable gift.

Benevolence is when you share resources with no expectation of a return favor.

It is an act of love to use one’s resources to help a neighbor – to transform a life.

Now this past week I have engaged in many conversations about whether or not the church is ‘giving away our money’ or starting down a ‘slippery slope’ of diminished resources.

The question most frequently asked has been ‘why should I donate the church if you (the church) has money to give away?’

With a deep sigh – I bring you back to Jesus’ words.

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.

We have the capacity, the blessed resources to make a difference in the world.

This is what we are called to do.

As Christians, we have a moral obligation to do the most we possibly can to ensure that our brothers and sisters throughout the world are cared for.

We ought to be celebrating our good fortune and falling over ourselves imagining creative ways to usher in God’s kingdom.

I want to report to you on some of the ways our past generosity has transformed lives:

For the past few years we have been in covenant with the United Congregational Church in Bridgeport, providing both financial and volunteer support to help them live out their mission of Christian outreach in Connecticut’s poorest city.

Last year United Congregational distributed 90,000 meals through their food pantry;

Seven thousand, two hundred hot meals were served through the *Feel The Warmth* dinners and soup kitchen;

the church met the challenge of providing shelter to homeless individuals in the heart of winter.

Reverend Sara characterized it this way in a letter thanking us for our support:

“Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ... whose journey to Jerusalem reminds us of the courage and faith it takes to serve God’s people.

This winter was particularly brutal in our state.

We all felt the effects of bitter cold nights, regular snow storms, and ice forming on everything.

Most of the citizens of our state had a place to call home where they could find a respite from the winter’s wrath - but not all.

The people who live without homes, or in sub-standard housing where there is no heat, suffered terribly.

So when United Congregational Church was approached to serve as the Pilot of a new Emergency Overflow Shelter program in Bridgeport, called “Operation Care,” we knew we must answer the call.

While we feed people regularly, our congregation had no experience in being a shelter, we had no budget for it, and we are already short-staffed in managing a very busy building with 10 outreach programs.

But we knew God was asking us to care for our most vulnerable neighbors, so we forged ahead.

Please know we could not have done this without you, our mission partner.

Knowing Salisbury Congregational Church was with us on this venture, allowed us – propelled us – to open our doors and set up the cots every night.”

From the church volunteer who ran the emergency shelter last winter came these words:

“Perhaps I am feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem.. there are no easy answers if there are any answers at all. I pray for each one of the people who have stayed with us.. and for the other people that are out there on the streets.. cold, alone, afraid and feeling like no one cares. What is hitting me as I write this is that we can tell them with every bit of certainty that people DO CARE. WE care. Our church cares. The shelters care. The city cares. The police care. People everywhere care... we just don't know what to do.... so we will do our best...”

This year, United Congregational will again open their doors as an emergency shelter, and they will need our support.

Providing shelter for our neighbors is an act of love.

Loving God and neighbor as much as we love ourselves.

Another way that we spread God’s love is our support for Silver Lake Conference Center and the young people who get an opportunity to spend time there each summer.

Last summer we sponsored sixteen children at Silver Lake.

Thirteen of these camperships were for children from our own congregation, with two for children from Bridgeport and one for a child living at the domestic violence shelter in Millerton.

Resources used to transform lives.

Providing opportunities for children to experience God’s presence is an act of love.

This week one of our own parishioners shared with me that he has developed the good habit of buying \$10 of extra food every time he goes to Stop and Shop.

He buys the items on sale to maximize the amount of food he donates each week to the Food Pantry.

He expressed concern that the Corner Food Pantry baskets are not getting the attention they deserve.

Providing food for our neighbors is an act of love.

So, in response to the question of whether or not the church needs your support – the answer is a resounding “Yes, more than ever!”

I invite you, my friends, to grow with me in faith.

Spread your wings and let your imagination fly as you prayerfully discern all of the different ways that you and this church might love *the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, help us to return your love in a multitude of ways.

Open our eyes and our hearts to receive our neighbors.

Grant us the grace we pray to discern what gifts we bring to the kingdom and how we might best use those gifts.

On this All Saints Day we give thanks for our ancestors in faith and for the church they so lovingly built.

Help us to be good stewards of all that has been entrusted to our care.

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 our brothers and sisters without resources, throughout the world, we pray that our offerings and service might transform their lives.

We pray for our leaders, that they might have a yearning for peace.

We turn to you now in the sacred silence of this Meetinghouse with the prayers of our hearts....

Silence

Jesus taught us to pray together in these words...Our Father

