

Sunday, November 13, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "Neighbor to Neighbor: Concern for Everybody"

"Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message."

I came upon this quote from Malcolm Muggeridge this week and it made me smile, thinking back on what we have been through these past few weeks.

The first message that came to mind as I was hearing the tales of how people fared in the storm was that deprivation levels the playing field.

Rich and poor, urban and rural, throughout the state we were all powerless for a period of time.

I think it is good for us to experience powerlessness once in a while.

Not just the loss of electric power or cell phone service, but the circumstance in which there is nothing one can do to change a given situation.

Such powerlessness motivates us to explore options that we might never consider otherwise.

We were forced out of our own comfort zones and into a crisis mode.

One person told me that she and her husband, along with their two children, felt a closeness during the storm that they realized was missing in their busy day-to-day lives. She said, "We actually had a moment of regret when the power came back on."

On Saturday night, before the storm really got going, Joe and I were watching the news.

The young meteorologist was very excited about the upcoming weather event exclaiming that he had never seen anything like it.

He reiterated this several times saying, "We just don't know what to expect."

Then he said, "One thing we know, the sun will come up tomorrow."

There was comfort perhaps in knowing that whatever happened, there would still be dawn, and daylight.

I would characterize that promise, as God's.

No matter how dark, no matter how scary, there will always be light.

The storm, as you know, came right after our day of discernment, where we had spent the morning exploring God's will for our church.

I have left the notes on the walls in fellowship hall for your review, if you were unable to attend.

We had engaged in lively conversation about the many ways we might live out our commitment to be God-centered, Jesus-focused and led by the Holy Spirit.

We talked about community and covenant and what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ.

We talked about caring for our neighbors.

And then, God gave us a chance to put our words into action.

It was as if God was saying, “OK, so you say that you are committed to helping your neighbors- let me see you do it.”

And do it we did.

Members of this congregation were front and center throughout town providing shelter, aid and assistance to those in need.

The Deacons, as well as many individuals, checked in on those who live alone, making sure that everyone was safe and sound.

In our chapter today from The Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life we explore “Caring for Others.”

Armstrong asks “To what extent are we still prey to the mechanisms of the me-first old brain?”

The power outage gave us a first-hand experience of needing to have our basic needs met.

One person told me that she was “surprised and dismayed to recognize her own selfishness in the wake of the storm.”

She spoke of a moment of reflection when she realized that she was worrying about her own warmth, hunger and comfort, before thinking of others.

This is not unusual, and it certainly is not something to be ashamed of.

It is simply the way that we are as human beings.

Our lives are so removed from the need to satisfy our basic needs for food and shelter that we are most often free to move to a higher level of thinking.

But snow in October changes all of that.

All of a sudden we are thrust into an environment where nothing is certain.

Our reptilian brains kick in.

Again, the lesson we have learned all along from Armstrong is that we must acknowledge this and then work, quite deliberately, to overcome it.

Jesus’ words today encourage the same thing.

“Judge not, lest you be judged.”

He asks “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

Jesus recognizes that our natural inclination is likely to be one of judgment and criticism of others.

By using the exaggeration of a “log or plank in someone’s eye” he drives home the point of how absurd it is to think that anyone has a right to judge another.

In Matthew’s theology, it is God alone who is responsible for judgment.

“First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye,” Jesus instructs.

He is calling us, again, to take responsibility for our own behaviors.

Honestly assessing our own lives is much more difficult than assessing someone else.

How often do we judge others, for actions that are unfamiliar to us?

It is actually a national pastime.

Think of something as simple as watching a sporting event and saying “Oh he should have caught that, or hit that” when of course, you couldn’t possibly hit a ball coming at you 90 miles an hour.

We judge our public officials with the same intensity – they should be able to get more done, to fix the economy, generate world peace or at least fix the power company.

We judge our neighbors with perhaps the greatest scrutiny based on appearance, beliefs, often superficial presumptions.

Today’s lesson both in Armstrong’s book and the scripture, is to remember that we are created as interdependent beings.

We each have gifts to offer and those gifts are nurtured and developed best in community.

Our challenge is to welcome and honor the gifts of other people in our lives.

Armstrong suggests “As you walk around your home, bring to mind all the people who built it, treated its timbers, baked its bricks, installed the plumbing, and wove your linens. When you get up in the morning, remember those who planted, picked, and spun the cotton of your sheets and who collected, treated, and exported the beans you grind for your morning coffee.”

This awareness of community is the foundation of our lives together.

Recognizing that our own lives are not only dependent on thousands of other people, but also on God.

It is from God that all of our gifts come.

It is from God that we are created.

The working mission statement that came out of our day of discernment is:

“The Salisbury Congregational Church is a community of Christians, God-centered, Christ-focused and led by the Holy Spirit to serve others. We are bound by covenant to walk with each other in God’s way.”

I think that we did a pretty good job of living up to this mission over the past two weeks.

The question before us today, as we go into our 267th annual meeting, is whether we are able to commit ourselves to this covenant.

We will vote on a budget to guide our work for the next year.

We are about to embark on the annual Every Member Canvass where each one of you is asked to pledge your financial support to this church.

We are the only source of income for our church.

There is no outside body that contributes to our well-being.

We are blessed with assets from our forbearers but we are also charged with being careful stewards of those assets.

Additionally, we are responsible for securing the future of this church for generations to come.

We come to church, my friends, to be reminded that we are created and loved by God.

We come to church to remember that Jesus Christ died for our sins and left us with the responsibility to carry on his work in the world.

We come to church to be lifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We come to church to share our joys and our sorrows in community.

We are one: one family, one spirit, one body of Christ.

There are many parts, no doubt, but the oneness, the sense of belonging to something much greater than yourself – this is why we gather.

Today, search your heart and see if you are viewing yourself clearly.

Is there a log in your eye?

Is something blocking your ability to reach out in love to your neighbor?

In the week ahead, I invite you to reflect on your experience of the power outage.

Did you learn something new about yourself?

Did you come away with a respect and awe for the power of nature, or anger at the electric company?

Did you feel emboldened by your ability to survive without some of your comforts or irritated that you were inconvenienced?

When you get your stewardship letter in the mail this week will you view it as an invitation to participate in building God's kingdom or will it go in the "bills to pay" file?

One thing we learned from the storm is that we must depend on others to provide much of the safety and comfort in our lives.

If "Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message" let's make sure that we are paying attention.

I would urge you to accept with joy the message that we can depend on God – we can always depend on God.