

Sunday, November 20, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Knowing and Loving Your Enemies."

Today we come to the end of our sermon series on compassion. We will look at the last three steps in Karen Armstrong's book: Knowledge, Recognition and finally, "Love Your Enemies."

Matthew's depiction of judgment day seems to summarize the lessons that we have learned these past few weeks about building a compassionate community.

This passage is Jesus' conclusion to a series of teachings focusing on the second coming of Christ.

Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his imminent death with the promise of a return.

He is urging them to stay alert to the presence of Christ in their lives.

He is encouraging them, and us as well, to live our lives in such a way that each encounter has the potential to be divine.

This is what we have been working toward with Armstrong's 12 steps.

In today's selection she suggests that we work to develop a wider, deeper knowledge of our neighbors and ourselves.

She reflects, "I was often taken aback by the way some Christians berated the violence and intolerance they attributed to Islam, showing not only an embarrassing ignorance of Muslim history but a surprising blindness to the Christian crusades, inquisitions, persecutions and wars of religion that had scarred their own faith."

She urges us to move away from "tribal thinking" by choosing a foreign country, or a religious or cultural tradition of which we know little and studying it closely."

Many of you have travelled, lived or worked in other countries and cultural settings.

While you were there you came to know the people and traditions in a unique way.

Once you have an understanding of how people live, judgment is more difficult.

I'm sure that today you pay closer attention to the news of those places where you lived or visited than you did before.

I know that when my son Andrew was studying in Italy last summer I carefully followed the news events of that country.

In doing so, I learned about the people, their culture and their beliefs.

Last year our niece married a young marine who was deployed to Afghanistan.

Suddenly the stories about war had a greater impact.

Each life lost became personalized.

The photographs in the paper all looked like Alex.

This what Jesus is urging in today's message.

When you see suffering, he asks you to see his face.

Armstrong suggests that "rather than steeling ourselves against the intrusion of other people's pain, we should regard our exposure to global suffering as a spiritual opportunity."

She encourages us to "make place for the other in your life."

By training ourselves to see sorrow, both globally and locally, we generate opportunities to care.

She cites the Genesis story of Yahweh's visit with Abraham and Sara.

Their welcome of the stranger, their ability to overcome inertia, reluctance, fear or repugnance is rewarded with an encounter with God."

These are the same opportunities that we have when we reach out to someone.

We may not know who they are, or understand their lifestyle or beliefs, but we can experience Christ in the encounter.

In Matthew's gospel today the nations are divided with people on the right or the left of Christ the King.

Those on the right are commended for their care and compassion. They are confused.

They didn't recall doing anything notable.

Jesus assures them that they lived with open hearts, seeing the sorrow and need of their neighbors.

The people who are put on the 'goats' side of the divide are equally confused.

They don't recall doing anything wrong.

Jesus helps them to understand that sometimes not doing something is worse than doing something wrong.

Silence, inaction, ignorance – these are the sins that are called to account on judgment day.

Jesus demands that we work, tirelessly, to create *shalom* with our neighbors.

Shalom of peace, wholeness and completion.

This week is full of opportunities to put this into action.

On Wednesday we will host the Interfaith Community Thanksgiving service.

We will join with our Muslim, Jewish, Unitarian, Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Buddhists neighbors to give thanks for the blessings in our lives.

Each faith tradition approaches God in a different way, but we all share a fundamental commitment to treating others as we would like to be treated.

I hope that you will join us with open hearts and open minds as we bear witness to the goodness of all of God's people.

On Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, many of you will gather around a table with your families and friends.

There is often enmity and anger in our closest circles.

Armstrong reminds us "if we want to achieve reconciliation, not only do we have to struggle with the enemy, but we also have to wrestle with ourselves."

In the final chapter of 12 *Steps to a Compassionate Life* we are instructed to "Love Our Enemies."

We have, of course, heard the same from Jesus who preaches an open handed, open hearted attitude designed to disarm the enemy.

"Complete love expects no personal recompense" we are told. We love because we are a compassionate people.

Our lesson on compassion ends with the reminder that our work will be life long.

We explored each of the twelve steps:

1. Learn About Compassion
2. Look at Your Own World
3. Compassion for Yourself
4. Empathy
5. Mindfulness
6. Action
7. How Little We Know
8. How We Should Speak to One Another
9. Concern for Everybody
10. Knowledge
11. Recognition
12. Love Your Enemies

The compassionate person, the person we strive to be, is described as a refuge for others. “A truly compassionate person touches a chord in us that resonates with some of our deepest yearnings.

If we achieve our goal of becoming compassionate we will leave the world better simply by having lived in it.

Let this week be one of gratitude. Spend time giving thanks and giving people reasons to be thankful for you.

Armstrong shared an early Buddhist poem:

May our loving thoughts fill the whole world, above, below, across—without limit;

Our love will know no obstacles—boundless goodwill toward the whole world, unrestricted, free of hatred or enmity.

Whether we are standing or walking, sitting or lying down, as long as we are awake we should cultivate this love in our heart.

This is the noblest way of living.

And for that, we give thanks to God.

Amen.