

Sunday, November 22, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “For the Beauty of the Earth”

Tough week.

Humanity has not been at its best this week.

Fear has moved center stage and has us in a grip so strong that we can't see straight.

Fear is the devil's most obvious tool, but also one of the most difficult to resist.

Faith is one antidote to fear.

Perhaps Jesus' admonition today not to worry seems simplistic to you, given world events.

But you must take it in context.

Jesus did not say to just sit back and never worry about anything.

He said:

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all the things you need will be given to you as well.”

Striving first for the kingdom of God means living by the laws set forth by God and the lessons taught by Jesus.

What Jesus is telling us is that if we follow his instruction – such as loving God and neighbor; striving for peace; lifting up the lowly; caring for the poor; feeding the hungry; we will not have to worry about other things.

I am often asked how God could let bad things happen to people in the world and I most often reply that God has created us with all that we need to build God's kingdom here on earth.

The majority of our problems are generated by humans.

I sincerely believe that if all the religions of the world followed their own teachings, including Christians, we would be at peace.

There would be enough food and resources for everyone and Jesus' advice not to worry would be spot on.

Our theme for today's service is taken from the hymn we just sang,

For the Beauty of the Earth.

This is one of my favorite hymns because it broadly identifies so many of the gifts God has bestowed upon us and expresses gratitude for them.

The beauty of the earth, the skies, love that surrounds us from our birth!

Each hour of the day and night, hill and vale, tree and flower, sun and moon and stars of light, friends on earth and friends above, for gentle thoughts;

for mystic harmony which a newer version of the hymn translates into ‘the joy of human love: brother, sister, parent, child.’

The newer version also includes ‘for the good that love inspires, for a world where none exclude, for a faith that never tires, and for every heart renewed.’

According to the New Century Hymnal, “Folliott S. Pierpoint penned these verses near his native city of Bath, England, on a late spring day when flowers were in full bloom and all the earth seemed to rejoice.”

When was the last time that you felt that all the earth seemed to rejoice?

Well, I think that it is time that we stand up to evil and fear in our lives and embrace our God given ability to feel joy – to rejoice.

There was a powerful video message circulating on the internet this past week of a young French man who lost his wife in the terrorist attack on the concert hall.

Addressing the terrorists he said, “I will not give you the gift of hating you.”

His message, our message, is that we must make the life that we want.

We must take responsibility for building God’s kingdom right here, right now.

We cannot blame others for the things that are wrong in our lives.

How we approach life is fundamental to the Christian faith.

Choosing life – over death; blessings over curses – has been the premise of our relationship with God since the very beginning.

God created us to be a joyful people.

The John Templeton Foundation has awarded \$4.2 million to Yale Divinity School’s Center for Faith and Culture to study the theology of joy.

The premise of the project is that ‘joy is fundamental to human existence and well-being.’

A host of scholars were asked how they defined joy and the answers included:

Joy=happiness + gratitude-a perfect sentiment for this Thanksgiving week;

Act of resistance against despair-I love this one. *An act of resistance* – it takes active intent to resist the fear and despair that is peddled in the media;

Practicing joy – if you practice something long enough, it will become a habit and eventually a natural response.

Try faking joy for a day or two and see if you can find a comfortable way of genuinely being joyful.

Connection with something beyond ourselves – other person, supernatural being, transcendence – this one is sort of a no brainer for those of us who live in relationship with God. Life really is better when you believe that there is something bigger than yourself.

Fundamentally about a relationship with God – perhaps this is the only thing that matters.

Inner strengths that enable a life to go well- when you like who you are, you are more likely to act favorably toward others.

Fruit of the spirit - #2 after love – friends, we know this – we just have to live it!

Spontaneous reaction – more spontaneous joy—less constraints on showing emotion.

Deep seated sense of well being with ones life and self...comes from a wisely lived life- sage advice;

Rooted in love and faith and hope – the words have been there for thousands of years...why don't we heed them?

One scholar defined hope as 'anticipated joy' where a second defined joy as 'gratitude for the reception of something hoped for.'

This made me think about the early church where the believers spent their lives waiting for Jesus to return – hope, anticipating joy; and now, we find joy in those blessings that we have already received.

As you gather around your Thanksgiving table this week, give thanks not just for what you have, but for what you hope for.

Perhaps the most compelling question raised by the project is whether joy is a matter of the fulfillment of desire or of the cessation of desire.

We have to stop wanting things or giving into destructive desires that undermine our ability to feel joy in our lives.

Rheinhold Niebuhr's Serenity prayers reminds us to accept the things we cannot change; to have the courage to change the things we can; and wisdom to know the difference.

This speaks to Jesus' instructions to not worry.

Last week I spoke of faith as something that sustains us when we are worried or afraid.

Faith and trust, hope and belief do not ensure that nothing will go wrong, or that you will have everything you want, or that your life will be perfect.

No, faith and trust, hope and belief, ensure that you can handle, cope with, whatever happens in your life.

The Theology of Joy and the Good Life project suggest that there are three dimensions to achieving joy: a life led well; life going well; and life feeling well.

It seems to me that a good percentage of that is up to you and how you view your life.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg, writing on the basic tenets of Judaism said: *There are joys which only companionship can yield, virtues that blossom only out of shared experience, and ideals that can be realized only in collectivity. To do God's will, which requires of us justice, mercy and humility, we must live with, among, and for others.*

So my friends, we are faced with the challenge of creating the world we want to inhabit.

If we want to live in peace, we need to work for peace.

If we want to be understood, we have to put some effort into understanding other people.

If we want joy to be prominent in our lives, we must promote the attainment of such in the lives of our neighbors.

Thomas Merton brilliantly observed that Peace is something that individuals attain by knowing that they are created, sustained, redeemed and loved by God.

He argues that once a person has reached this stage of knowing it will be impossible to act violently toward another human being.

The young Frenchman on the video has attained this stage of knowing;

We can take it one step further.

We can refuse to return evil for evil;

We can commit ourselves to peace;

We can, and must, continue to raise our faithful hymn of praise to the one who created, redeemed and sustains us.