

Sunday, November 24, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Christ is the King"

This past Monday we hosted the junior class from Hotchkiss School, here in the Meetinghouse.

It was an all-class assembly where students heard from a panel of speakers representing a group called "Faces of Homelessness" out of Hartford.

Three formerly homeless people and an advocate shared their stories of lives gone awry – and lives restored.

The first speaker was 50 year old Jose.

He spoke of losing his housing in a divorce, getting involved with drugs, contracting HIV, spending time in jail – twice, and finally finding housing at Peter's Retreat – a supportive housing program for people with AIDS in Hartford.

Next, Ann spoke. She is 63 years old and had always had a job and an apartment.

She became homeless when her company downsized and she was laid off.

Despite ongoing efforts to find a job, she remained unemployed and had to give up her apartment.

She spent about a year and a half in a shelter and just recently was approved for housing in the newly refurbished Colt Mansion – which has been developed as permanent housing for senior women.

The final speaker was a young man, 20 years old, named Frank.

Frank shared that he had been popular in high school – hosting a lot of parties.

During his senior year in high school his house burned down and his family spent a year staying with different friends.

He said that he didn't even know he was homeless until he was forced to move into a shelter.

He recounted how he had made some bad choices, lost his job and couldn't seem to get his act together.

At the close of his presentation he looked right into the eyes of the 176 students and said, "Everything can change in just one second. One choice and everything is different."

Frank was talking about his choice to try heroin, but I started thinking about how the same thing applies to opening our hearts to God.

In just one moment, everything can change.

There are many ways to describe how we commit ourselves to a life of faith – born again, accepting Jesus as our savior, being saved...the words are not what matters.

What matters is turning our lives over to God and committing to live as Christians.

One writer put it this way:

It may feel daunting to face the call to be a witness to Christ, but this doesn't mean that God is asking you to stand on street corners and preach.

Rather, in the midst of a world of suffering, our best witness is to reject selfishness and think of others, to reject despair and continue to hope, to reject violence and work for peace, and to reject division and hatred in favor of love for those around us.

These Christlike attitudes and actions do not require dramatic efforts. They are expressed in the simple routines of our daily lives.

In the United Church of Christ we are each called to be ministers in the world – every day, everywhere.

Ministry is acting in the Name of Jesus.

To act in the Name of Jesus doesn't mean to act as a representative of Jesus or his spokesperson.

It means to act in an intimate communion with him.

Henri Nouwen contends that The Name is like a house, a tent, a dwelling.

To act in the Name of Jesus, he says, means to act from the place where we are united with Jesus in love – from the heart.

To the question "Where are you?" we should be able to answer, "I am in the Name."

Then, whatever we do cannot be other than ministry because it will always be Jesus himself who acts in and through us."

This is the point being made by the author of Colossians.

God is not only all-powerful, but he shares that power with us.

He holds us up in difficult times – "he has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son.

This is where we reside – in the kingdom, in the light.

We often minimize our own existence.

We talk of short lives and mortality.

We question what significance we might have.

Scripture, however, tells us that we are important.

The verse before our reading today is a blessing – a prayer that says,

We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

We have the capacity to transform both our own lives and the lives of those around us when we act in the name of Jesus.

Ann, the woman from “Faces of Homelessness” closed her remarks with a poem that she wrote when she lived in a shelter. She gave me permission to share it with you.

Voices from the Shelter

They told me: Remember, nobody here is your friend

Oh, it's okay to like people

But don't let them get too close

Or they will use you every time

They told me: Don't share your food

Don't leave it out

Or they will grab all they can carry

And hoard it, or sell it

They told me: All addicts are liars

They'll hand you their BS lines

Play on your sympathy

Don't believe anything they say

So I listened

But also liked

And shared

And believed

And I learned that

Sometimes they were right

But not always

And I learned that

I will never learn not to care

For that, I am grateful
My friends, to know Christ is to know God.
To know your neighbor is to know God.

On this last day of the liturgical year, I invite you to look back over the year that has passed and ask yourself if you have lived up to God's expectations of you.

Has your life reflected the compassion that Jesus showed?

Has God's Holy Spirit changed you?

Are you different than you were a year ago?

We are called to be agents of transformation – both internally and externally.

We are called to spend our whole lives getting closer to God – learning more, feeling more.

We are meant to tend to the earth, to care for our neighbors, to experience and acknowledge God's presence throughout each day.

As we approach Advent, the season of preparation, I invite you to deeply engage in spiritual reflection.

Explore the impact your faith has on your life.

Delve into your beliefs.

Breathe deeply and allow yourself to be still in God's presence.

Listen for God.

What is God saying to you?

As you go out into the world, remember the words of today's psalmist

God is our refuge and strength,

A very present help in trouble,

Therefore we will not fear,

Though the earth should change,

Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,

Though its waters roar and foam

Though the mountains tremble with its tumult....

Be still, and know that I am God.