

Sunday, October 16, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Go and Do Likewise”

Today we will continue our study of the *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*.

We are going to look at both the fourth and fifth step, *Empathy* and *Mindfulness*.

Our last step, two weeks ago, was *Compassion for Ourselves*.

Today, we begin the process of turning outward – toward our neighbors.

We examine what it means to take care of one another, to care about one another.

Empathy and Compassion are both words that demand us to think beyond ourselves.

A person cannot be empathic or compassionate without noticing, recognizing a neighbor’s pain.

Last week Pete Allen talked about the children served by Simply Smiles in Mexico.

He left out one instruction that was transformative for me as a volunteer.

In helping us plan for our trip Bryan Nurnberger, founder of Simply Smiles, had told us that the most important thing we were doing in the orphanage, or in the mountain village, was noticing people.

He said that people who are as deeply impoverished as those we would meet were most often invisible to others.

Pete shared with us the story of the child who had no name because the parents had no expectation of the child surviving.

By not assigning a name, they hoped to keep their heartache at bay.

If someone doesn’t have a name, they don’t exist.

But scripture tells us that God calls us each by name, so each created being, no matter how poor or insignificant, exists in God’s eyes.

Jesus uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate two important lessons: that empathy can be extended to those we might ignore;

And that empathy can be delivered by those we least expect to do so.

In Armstrong’s discussion for today she tells of the ancient Greeks, founders of the Western rational tradition, who had a uniquely tragic view of life.

Each year on the festival of Dionysus, *God of transformation*, the leading playwrights of Athens presented tragic trilogies in a drama competition.

Every citizen was obliged to attend.

The plays usually dramatized one of the old myths adapted to reflect the problems and situation of the city that year.

This event was both a spiritual exercise and a civic meditation.

It put suffering onstage and compelled the audience to empathize with men and women struggling with impossible decisions and facing up to the disastrous consequences of their actions.

The Greeks came to the plays in order to weep together, convinced that the sharing of grief strengthened the bond of citizenship and reminded each member of the audience that he was not alone in his personal sorrow.

The audience would achieve a “stepping out” of ingrained preconceptions in an empathic way that, before seeing the play, they would probably have deemed impossible.

Plays, films and novels all enable us to enter imaginatively into other lives and identify with people whose experiences are entirely different than our own.

Imagination is crucial to the compassionate life.

Jesus’ parable today gives us such an opportunity.

Let’s review the characters and use our imaginations to figure out where we might place ourselves in the story.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him and went away.

This traveling man would have been an ordinary Jewish layperson on an ordinary trip down a well-travelled road, a road noted for occasional trouble.

Perhaps you can recall a time when you were walking down a street in an unfamiliar town.

Maybe there has even been a time when you were mugged or robbed.

There is, more likely, a time that you can remember when you felt beat up and in need of help.

“A priest was going down that road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.”

A priest was a holy man, noted for strict adherence to the law.

Try to recollect a time when you may have crossed a street, either figuratively or literally, to avoid someone you found troublesome.

You are in the grocery store and out of the corner of your eye you see someone who you don’t want to deal with.

You “cross the street” to avoid them.

So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

A Levite was a temple functionary, one who served the priestly tribe of Levi.

He was likely to be concerned with the laws regarding impurity from contact with a half-dead person.

Sometimes we avoid people because they seem to be outside of our community –beyond the reach of our unspoken rules.

Have you ever felt that someone was avoiding you for reasons that you did not understand?

A Samaritan, while traveling came near him and was moved with pity.

A Samaritan would have been a foreigner, traveling far from home.

The Samaritans were considered neither Jews nor Gentiles and were regarded with hostility by Jews.

One commentator compared the Samaritans of Jesus' time with Al Qaeda today – a despised and feared people.

If you needed help, could you reach out to someone that different?

Could you be the Samaritan offering help to someone who you know despises you?

Today we must ask ourselves who we are in this story?

Are you the traveller, the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan?

Which role feels most comfortable for you?

Can you admit to being the man in the ditch in dire need of help?

Perhaps you are more comfortable thinking that you would be the Samaritan.

That is a tall order.

How often are we able to completely put our own needs and desires aside and give our self over to someone else?

Earlier this week I found myself saying to my friend, Ann, who just lost her husband, “If there is anything that I can do, anything, just let me know.” We often say that. But do we really mean it?

That night I had a dream that Ann and I were at a BeeGees concert! Now for those who don't remember, the BeeGees were a really awful, 1970's band. I can't imagine being at one of their concerts. For me, the message in my dream, the reality of our subconscious actions, is that we rarely are able to completely lose ourselves and give to another.

Thomas Long reflects that what we discover in the parable of the Good Samaritan is that we simply cannot act in a totally selfless way.

He says “for all of our religious virtues and attitudes, we just cannot figure out how to be good. We are helpless to be Good Samaritans on our own strength. In other words, he argues, we are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued.

And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus - despised and rejected - who comes to save us, speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing.”

So the purpose of this story is not to compel us to help our neighbor, but to urge us to recognize that we are in need of being rescued.

Sometimes, we are the man in the ditch.

Armstrong urges us to understand this by exercising mindfulness. Mindfulness, the fifth step in building a compassionate life, is designed to give us more control over our minds so that we can reverse ingrained tendencies and cultivate new ones.

In mindfulness we mentally stand back and observe our behavior while we are engaged in the normal process of living.

We do this in order to discover more about the way we interact with people.

We are asked to watch ourselves, in a detached way, to determine what makes us angry and unhappy.

We are encouraged to analyze our experiences and to pay attention to the present moment.

We become aware of instinctive, automatic mental processes.

We are invited to pay close attention to how impulses arise in response to stimuli that make us irrationally angry, hostile, or frightened.

Then we are asked to observe how quickly these negative feelings can overturn more peaceful, positive emotions.

This is a difficult step in building our compassionate lives.

I invite you to try it this week. Watch yourself from an outside point of view.

Armstrong reminds us “As long as we close our minds to the pain that presses in upon us on all sides, we remain imprisoned in delusion, because this artificial existence bears no relations to reality.”

It is not easy to look at Jesus’ parable and admit that we might be the one who crosses the road.

It is scary to think that we are the man in the ditch.

We want to believe that we are the good Samaritans.

We want to believe that we will do what is right.

We can be the good Samaritans.

We can embrace the commandment to love, recognizing that there are no rules or boundaries for compassion.

We can choose to offer extravagant compassion – attention, bandages, oil, wine, shelter, care – to the stranger.

We just have to make the commitment to do it.

We have to understand that we need Jesus’ help to lift us up out of our own ditches and set us on the road to a compassionate life.

We can do it.

We will do it, together.