

**Sunday, November 2, 2014**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “How Many Pastors Does It Take?”**

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Last Monday my class at Hartford Seminary went on a field trip to visit the Liberty Church in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts about 10 miles outside of Worcester.

The 40,000 square foot facility sits on 13 beautiful wooded acres.

The church was founded just 20 years ago –with only 12 members.

At the height of their success they hosted up to 2,000 people each week for worship and ran a large program in the city of Worcester where they ministered to the poor.

Worship includes rock bands and multi-media presentations in the 1,200 seat auditorium.

Much of Liberty’s success is attributed to the founding pastor, Reverend Will Bard and his family members – all designated as Pastors and members of the paid staff.

Reverend Bard left the church unexpectedly in February 2014 to pursue other dreams and the church has spiraled downward since.

Attendance has dropped below 1,000 and they are unable to meet the payment on their \$11 million mortgage.

At the time of our visit they were interviewing Chinese investors to determine if they could save their buildings.

We toured the campus with the Administrative Pastor – there is a pastor for everything – as he explained their efforts to ‘repurpose’ the building during the week, renting space to the state of Massachusetts for various social service programs.

I asked if the people who attended services on the weekend had any involvement with the church during the week, and he said ‘very little.’

I share all of this with you because Liberty’s founding documents use Mark’s version of today’s scripture reading as the definition for “What it Means to be a Minister or a Pastor.”

It says, “Ministry – whether that of a member or of a pastor – is not an office of worldly power and authority. Rather, in the likeness of Christ, it is a servant ministry and giving up power to serve.

*From Mark 10: So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.*

*But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”*

The Liberty Church was founded on a principle of active faith – participation by all of the members in the life of the church.

Unfortunately, the reality did not reflect the vision.

The folks who were coming on Sunday for an inspiring message were not interested in living out that message the rest of the week.

The leader, in turn, was making unilateral decisions for which the larger community would be responsible.

It turned into a recipe for disaster.

While this mega church may seem light years away from our own church, our United Church of Christ constitution identifies all members as ministers to the world:

*“The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society. The United Church of Christ seeks to undergird the ministry of its members by nurturing faith, calling forth gifts, and equipping members for Christian service.”*

Being a servant, living as a slave is not very attractive to people in this day and age.

It is challenging to live a life committed to service.

Jesus’ lesson today is a call to his disciples to live an authentic life, to practice what they preach.

He wants his disciples to seek out teachers who do the same, whose words and actions match up.

Jesus did not deny the need for leaders.

Rather, he saw leadership as a function, not a position.

For Jesus all people are equal as sisters and brothers, and all are called to be servants to one another.

Rather than seeking influence and status we are to seek humility and integrity - to let our gentle, self-giving lives speak far louder than our words.

Our words need to align with what people see in our lives.

We are to be servants – caring for one another, concerned for one another, connected to one another.

One author described it this way: “The emphasis in the Christ-following life is always on the work of God. It is God's mission that is important. It is God's Reign that determines the values and priorities of our lives. It is God's grace that enables us to be a part of what God is doing. It is God's love that draws into the way of Jesus, and it is God's life that flows into and through us.”

We are called to an active faith.

We are meant to be channels of God's love into the world.

Passive faith, one that only involves attending worship or professing belief inevitably leads to some degree of hypocrisy.

This is perhaps the most prominent criticism that non Christians lodge against Christians—the charge that we don't live up to what we espouse.

This is why integrity is such an important value if we are to build God's kingdom.

It is only when our thoughts, attitudes, feelings, values, priorities, words and behavior all align that our lives truly reflect God's mission.

When our faith embraces every part of our lives, including our actions, it becomes vibrant, creative and life-giving to all around us.

In Susan Trout's book, *Born to Serve*, she says "Service is less about doing and more about being."

Being Christian is a way of life.

It is not just a set of beliefs set down in a book or recited in a creed.

All of our acts, every choice we make, is in response to the indwelling spirit of God that resides in each and every one of us.

Church is where we come together to attune our hearts to that indwelling spirit.

We come together to learn to listen...to God, to ourselves and to our neighbors.

This one hour a week is meant as nourishment, spiritual food that will sustain you throughout the week.

As with any food or nourishment, you must take it in.

Henri Nouwen described church this way. "The Church as the body of Christ has many faces. The Church prays and worships. It speaks words of instruction and healing, cleanses us from our sins, invites us to the table of the Lord, binds us together in a covenant of love, sends us out to minister, anoints us when we are sick or dying, and accompanies us in our search for meaning and our daily need for support. All these faces might not come to us from those we look up to as our leaders. But when we live our lives with a simple trust that Jesus comes to us in our Church, we will see the Church's ministry in places and in faces where we least expect it. If we truly love Jesus, Jesus will send us the people to give us what we most need. And they are our spiritual leaders."

My friends, we are a community – a gathered people committed to worshipping Jesus Christ.

We must live our lives, each moment, as if Jesus is standing in front of us – sitting at our tables – observing our actions.

We are called to minister to the world – each one with different gifts to bear.

Let us go from this place nourished, fed, energized to bring the good news of God's love to all people.