

Learning Civility: Tolerance Isn't Enough
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1 Peter 3:8-17

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For

*“Those who desire life
and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”*

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

I shared earlier with you my experience with road rage this summer, and since then I have had many of you come and share the encounters that you have had with people filled with anger and/or road rage.

We live in a very challenging time

In 2010 a study was conducted on CIVILITY in our nation. **2010**

62% said that incivility was a major problem
72% said that incivility was getting worse

Interestingly --- the worst place for civility?
Politics, followed closely by road rage

Least uncivil place --- houses of worship

I wish I could have found a more recent study, but I am willing to bet that civility is perceived as being worse today than 8 years ago.

A powerful personal testimonial on civility is shared by writer Ann Bauer in a piece called: "Our Anger Is Poisoning Us". She wrote it following the sudden and mysterious death of her 28 year old son. (Washington Post)

My perception is that civility has been in decline recently

As I worked on this sermon, I read dozens of sermons on civility

And I noticed a huge change in tone over the last couple of years

And that change seems so profound that I began limiting my resources to things that were at least 5 or 6 years old to try and avoid any hint of our current state of affairs.

I don't want to pretend that incivility is a new problem

We have been wrestling with it as long as people have been in relationship with one another.

However, if one wants to do some research it seems clear that there are a number of factors that lead to an increase in incivility.

I don't have the time to get into that now, but you are all capable of digging deeper if you wish to find out more. I highly recommend Parker Palmer's book: Healing the Heart of Democracy written in 2011.

What is civility?

Os Guinness in an interview with *Faith and Leadership* in 2009 said:

Misunderstandings surround the idea of civility; it's frequently mistaken for squeamishness about cultural differences, false tolerance or dinner-party etiquette. Classically, civility is a republican virtue, with a small "r," and a democratic necessity, with a small "d." It's the only way you can have a diverse society, freely but civilly, peacefully.

Gail Strong earlier this year made a statement that has really stuck with me. I apologize if I get this a little wrong, but in essence what she suggested is that we spend way too much time worrying about creating safe spaces --- and instead we need to create courageous spaces.

Let me unpack that for a moment.

As I understand safe space --- that is a place where no one is going to get their feelings hurt or their understandings challenged. It is a place safe from anything but parroting what I believe

Merriam Webster defines it as: a place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations

Many of us believe the church should be a safe space

Go read the Prophets

Better yet, go read Jesus

If the church is a place where we are not going to be challenged
--- then we cannot follow Jesus because he is constantly
challenging us (or at least he is challenging me)

I hate to tell you --- I am filled with bias

I do my best to be biased for Jesus

We need to create courageous spaces --- places where we can set aside our bitterness and advocate and discuss what it means to live out Jesus' command to love one another

I believe that is what the church is --- when it is at its best.

The last two years have been fascinating to me in how people have responded to my sermons

- someone, following a sermon told me that in the sermon I gave them permission to vote for Trump
- others have walked out of worship because they believe that I am anti-Trump

I am PRO-Jesus --- and biased for the Way that Jesus calls us.

The Way of Jesus, as I tried to share a few weeks ago is neither blue nor red. I have challenged both parties when they are in control of government and acting in ways that are antithetical to the way of Jesus.

Os Guinness says:

It's time for Christians to speak out, to follow our Lord clearly and differently. I boil [the difference] down to three words: integrity, credibility and civility. Integrity asks, "can we be 100 percent faithful to Jesus, following his teachings, growing like him and still engage with the modern world so that faith prevails?" That's integrity. Much of the church lacks integrity.

The second difference is in credibility. Since the Enlightenment all Christians are what Richard Dawkins calls "faith heads," anti-intellectuals, despite the fact that many of the greatest thinkers of Western history -- Augustine, Pascal and Newton among them -- loved Christ passionately. I knew Bertrand Russell when I was a student. He said Christians would sooner die than think. We need to be champions of truth, champions of thinking and love God with our minds in order to recover the great credibility of the gospel.

The third difference is with civility. That sounds very abstract, compared to addressing AIDS, or nuclear issues or terrorism. Actually, living with our deep differences underlies all the other issues. America once got it nearly right, but America is losing its way.

What does that look like?

To live with integrity, credibility and civility

Let me try to give you an example

John McCain may have given up his dream of the Presidency because he advocated for integrity, credibility and civility.

In an article from 2008 (Politico 10/10/08)

Fearing the raw and at times angry emotions of his supporters may damage his campaign, John McCain on Friday urged them to tone down their increasingly personal denunciations of Barack Obama, including one woman who said she had heard that the Democrat was "an Arab."

Each time he tried to cool the crowd, he was rewarded with a round of boos.

"I have to tell you. Sen. Obama is a decent person and a person you don't have to be scared of as president of the United States," McCain told a supporter at a town hall

meeting in Minnesota who said he was "scared" of the prospect of an Obama presidency and of who the Democrat would appoint to the Supreme Court.

"Come on, John!" one audience member yelled out as the Republican crowd expressed dismay at their nominee. Others yelled "liar," and "terrorist," referring to Obama.

McCain passed his wireless microphone to one woman who said, "I can't trust Obama. I have read about him and he's not, he's not uh — he's an Arab. He's not — " before McCain retook the microphone and replied:

"No, ma'am. He's a decent family man [and] citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues and that's what this campaign's all about. He's not [an Arab]."

...

McCain promised the audience he wouldn't back down — but again sought to tamp down emotions.

"We want to fight, and I will fight," McCain said. "But I will be respectful. I admire Sen. Obama and his accomplishments, and I will respect him."

At which point he was booed again.

As we have read and watched the tributes for the late Senator McCain, many have commented (with the benefit of hindsight) that this exchange may have cost him the presidency

Integrity, credibility and civility

Parker Palmer in his marvelous book continually calls on us: WE THE PEOPLE to drive the discourse that takes place in our society. Like Os Guinness, he would suggest that too often we have given up and just accept the uncivil behavior to continue.

He writes:

Talking about "those people" instead of talking with each other is a poor excuse for genuine political discourse.

...

If we want to "create a politics worthy of the human spirit," we must find ways to bridge our differences, whether they are defined by age, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or political ideology. Then we must seek patches of common ground on the issues we care most about. This is more than a feel-good exercise.

...

I will not plead for tolerance, a virtue so thin it is barely a virtue: "Be of good cheer! I am willing to tolerate you!" Nor will I spend much time pleading for better manners in public discourse: manners for the sake of manners are as thin as tolerance. The civility we need will not come from watching our tongues. It will come from valuing our differences.

Charles Camosy teaches Christian ethics at Fordham University in New York. In 2012 he wrote a column for The Seattle Times called "Five Tips for a Civic Discourse." (http://old.seattletimes.com/html/opinion/2018728414_guest20charlescamosy.html)

He writes:

I propose five practices for moving beyond the polarization which currently dominates our public discourse:

- **Humility.** We are finite, flawed beings and are prone to making serious mistakes. We need to enter into discussions and arguments with this at the very front of our minds — not only in being comfortable with someone challenging our point of view, but also reserving the right to change our mind when our argument is shown to be problematic.
- **Solidarity with our conversation partner.** This involves active listening, presuming that one has something to learn, and (if possible) getting to know them personally beyond an abstraction. Never reduce another's ideas because of their gender, race, level of privilege, sexual orientation, or social location. Similarly, never reduce them to what you suspect are their "secret personal motivations." Instead, give your partner the courtesy of carefully responding to the actual idea or argument that she is offering for your consideration.
- **Avoiding binary thinking.** The issues that are seriously debated in our public sphere are almost always too complex to fit into simplistic categories like liberal/conservative, religious/secular, open/close-minded, pro-life/pro-choice, etc. Furthermore, it sets up framework in which taking one side automatically defines one against "the other side" — thus further limiting serious and open engagement.
- **Avoiding fence-building and dismissive words and phrases.** It might feel good to score these rhetorical points, but doing so is one of the major contributors to our polarized discourse. Let us simply stop using words and phrases like: radical feminist, war on women, neocon, limousine liberal, prude, heretic, tree-hugger, anti-science, anti-life, and so on. Instead, use language that engages and draws the other into a fruitful engage of ideas.
- **Leading with what you are for.** Not only is this the best way to make a convincing case for the view you currently hold, but this practice often reveals that we are actually after very similar things and simply need to be able to talk in an open and coherent way about the best plan for getting there.

If you want some suggestions that are a little more pious sounding, at our 2015 Annual Conference, the Indiana United Methodist conference adopted the following guidelines.

1. **RESPECT** others as Jesus would have done when he was here on earth.
2. **PRAY** for others as well as yourself especially those with whom you disagree.
3. **LISTEN** to others before thinking about what you want to say in response.
4. **UNDERSTAND** what others are saying so clearly that you could accurately state their view.
5. **SHARE** your own point of view with grace and humility as well as honesty and candor.
6. **FOCUS** your commitments on issues being discussed not on persons expressing them.
7. **COMMIT** yourself to the unity of the Spirit seeking consensus whenever possible.
8. **GIVE** the time needed to work through the process in which you are engaged.
9. **ACKNOWLEDGE** that you may be wrong even when you think you are right.
10. Allow the **Fruit of the Spirit** to permeate your way of interacting with others; Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control.

President Lincoln said in the Gettysburg Address that "we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

As United Methodists, we too seem to be engaged in a great civil war over the inclusion of LGBTQI people in the life of the church.

Great sums of money, heartbreak, and loss have already occurred. But, from my window peering in on the process, very little civil dialog is taking place. Mainly it just seems to be monologs with "the base".

If we are going to avoid a split within the church, it is going to take each of us listening to each other. And learning to love one another again.

Following, as Lincoln suggested in his 2nd Inaugural address:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

As Christians, followers of Jesus we have one job to do, to make disciples for Jesus. We can't do that if we don't work together.

The world is looking at us and laughing

We say that we are a people of: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors, it is time for all of us to start living that way.