

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/AUGUST 16, 2009

CIVILITY/I CORINTHIANS 11:17-22

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I. THE TEXT

In our text this morning the Apostle Paul is a bit troubled. He is concerned about the fledgling church in Corinth. While he has had many good things to commend them for, he's heard reports that, of all things, the Lord's Supper has become something of a competitive sport – a development that does not make him happy. Hear the word of God from I Corinthians 11...

¹⁷ Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²² What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

II. PRAYER: O God, be in our minds and in our hearts, in our being and in our doing, in our listening and in our speaking. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, for you alone are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

III. CIVILITY CHALLENGED

Perhaps as a classroom penmanship assignment, young George Washington copied by hand a set of *110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, originally set forth by French Jesuits in 1595. To the modern ear, most of the 110 Rules of Civility seem a bit fussy, laughably outdated and better suited to the antiquated world of powdered wigs and snuff-boxes. Whether eliciting an earnest nod or a chuckle, is there not something to be said for a code of behavior that focuses on the well-being of the other rather than the unbridled self-interest we so often see and experience?

1st rule: Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

4th: In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.

65th: Speak not injurious Words neither in Jest nor Earnest; Scoff at none although they give Occasion.

89th: Speak not Evil of the absent for it is unjust.

100th: Cleanse not your teeth with the Table Cloth Napkin, Fork or Knife but if Others do it let it be done wt. a Pick Tooth.

110th: Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.

Indeed, reminders of an era long past. Fast forward several centuries and consider a different reality. From billboards proclaiming Chelsea Handler as “The sharpest tongue in late night” to Howard Stern, from Ann Coulter to Keith Olberman, to trying to change lanes on a crowded 405, cynicism trumps civility, hostility crowds out kindness. Attacks on Little League umpires and AYSO officials have become so prevalent that the National Association of Sports Officials now offers its members assault insurance. Film clips of screaming parents at their kids’ games are standard fare.

LA Times writer Roy Rivenburg characterized the nature of things this way, albeit in somewhat rough language – “we’ve moved from the “we” decade, to the “me” decade, to the “up yours” decade.”¹ In other words, we are no longer what George Washington – or, probably, our parents – would consider civil. From the Latin,² civility means “proper to a citizen.” As Christians we have dual citizenship – citizens of our country and of the kingdom of God. Civility has to do with a critical aspect of life on the planet – how we treat one another, how we do life together on a crowded planet. As with most everything important in life, God has something to say on the topic.

IV. ANCIENT TEXT

We humans have always struggled with being civil... from Cain and Abel, to the early church, to the Hatfields and McCoys, we get caught up in the mistaken notion that, simply put, my personal rights and comforts are more important than yours. In the text we just read, Paul is concerned about a certain lack of civility in the church in Corinth... it seems their manners were pretty appalling. No, they weren’t chewing with their mouths open or picking their teeth with a fork... it was much worse... and Paul weighs in with a pretty severe reprimand.

They were behaving as if they or their little groups were the only ones that mattered... self-interest was in. What we now celebrate as the Lord’s Supper was initially part of a sort of church “potluck supper.” The intent was that the Supper be a demonstration of love and unity within the body of Christ. But something had gone very wrong. The wealthy, with their escargot appetizers and filet mignon entrees hoarded all the gourmet food for their little in-group, while those whose budgets allowed for Kraft Macaroni and Cheese went home hungry. The Jewish Christians and Greek Christians wouldn’t speak to each other. Others were getting plastered on the communion wine – obviously they weren’t using tiny plastic cups. And so, the feast of Christian love and unity had turned into an unseemly gathering of the selfish whose theme hymn was, “it’s all about me?!” The Apostle Paul writes – “in this matter I do not commend you!”

It seems the early church had issues with civility... they were not alone. Begin to read through the Bible and you will quickly see that God quite regularly needed to correct and guide the way we treat each another. The Leviticus text we read earlier is one of many in which God says – stop being so selfish (today we might use the word narcissistic). You’ve got to treat your neighbor better, even the ones you do not know – their needs matter as much as yours. It is put in very practical terms – “you have to provide for the poor... pay your employees fairly and on time... don’t slander or take more than your fair share or disrespect your elders... on and on it goes – and all those divine admonitions about civil behavior are summed up best by Jesus’ words – “love your neighbor as yourself.”

God does seem a bit, well, fussy at times. Couldn't God just watch a bit of Jerry Springer and catch up with the times? More likely, having watched 2 hours of TV or driving the 405 God would ask us – is this really the sort of world you want?

V. SHIFTS IN CIVILITY

Yale law professor Stephen Carter, reflects on modern shifts away from civility. I am quoting him at length, so please bear with me – and think about the spirit reflected in his description of life together... “In the middle of the unruly nineteenth century, there were no automobiles, but America was agog over railroads. For the first time in human history, horseback was not the fastest way to travel. An entrepreneur named Leland Stanford hammered a golden spike into a rocky Utah plateau and the coasts were connected by three-thousand miles of track. Everybody wanted to ride. Everybody suddenly had someplace to go.

“Travel in those days was necessarily in groups. You bought a ticket and sat down in a train car full of strangers. Doubtless the excited passengers jostled each other for space, but... it was not yet the nation's fashion to be rude. On the contrary, this remarkable new technology worked as well as it did, moving the citizenry from city to city, because the travelers **understood their obligation to treat each other well.** They purchased guides to proper behavior, like *Politeness on Railroads*... and tried to follow its sensible rules: “Whispering, loud talking, immoderate laughing, and singing should not be indulged by any passenger” was one. “Passengers should not gaze at one another in an embarrassing way’ ran another.’ Conductors were soon cracking down on passengers who “indulged personal preferences at the expense of other passengers.”

“...to travel so far together, packed shoulder to shoulder like chess pieces in their little box, everybody had to behave or the ride would become intolerable. Everyone followed the rules for the sake of their fellow passengers, and they did so... out of a spirit of ‘self-denial and the self-sacrifice of one's own comfort for another's.’ Alone of God's creation, human beings can make those choices, setting aside their own needs and desires for the sake of living in society with others...

Carter continues... “But nowadays we have automobiles, and we travel both long and short distances surrounded by metal and glass and the illusion that we are traveling alone. The illusion has seeped into every crevice of our public and private lives, persuading us that sacrifices are no longer necessary. If railroad passengers a century ago knew the journey would be impossible unless they **considered the comfort of others more important than their own,** our spreading illusion has taken us in the other direction. We care less and less about our fellow citizens, because we no longer see them as our fellow passengers. We may see them as obstacles or competitors, or we may not see them at all, but unless they happen to be our friends, we rarely think we owe them anything.”³

VI. CHRISTIAN CIVILITY

Stephen Carter gets the spirit of what the Apostle Paul was saying to the Corinthian Christians and what God has been saying all along... you're on the same train... pay attention to everyone's comfort... you do owe your fellow travelers something.

Christians, God says, are those who willingly sacrifice for the common good. It's not about me, it's about **us**... not only about us in the church but about the strangers we

meet at Ralph's, or the ones we pass on the 10, or the ones we'd rather not see at all. We act in the best interests of others, even when it costs us. We do understand that we are fellow passengers with all of the rest of the global citizenship and we intend to be good traveling companions.

Because we care about the common good we are mindful of the potential ripple effect of our behaviors. Rude almost always begets rude and mean almost always begets mean, and the common good gets wounded. But, kindness often begets kindness, love often begets love, and the common good is strengthened and healed. And when mean or rude is countered by a Christian's kindness, the progression of evil is broken. As silly as it may seem, we use our turn indicators, we wait our turn, we turn off our cell phones because the basic components of civility demonstrate our respect for the other – we say to them, you matter, too. We are willing to be inconvenienced, we go out of our way because we recognize that our behaviors have tremendous power to either build up or diminish the common good and impact the quality of our common journey.

Desmond Tutu is the Episcopal Archbishop Emeritus of South Africa and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in undoing the racist system of apartheid in South Africa. Archbishop Tutu tells the story of what would seem to many a minor childhood experience. When he was a young boy, in the context of South Africa's extreme racial hatred, he observed a white man making a kind gesture to a black woman. It was a rather shocking thing because kind gestures between white and black were absolutely unheard of in those days. But this little gesture of kindness had great power for Tutu, because the white man was a minister and the black woman was Desmond's mother. Tutu says, "and that is why I became a minister."⁴ A little kindness altered Tutu's life, Tutu's life altered the world.

The little kindnesses, the seemingly insignificant courtesies, the small sacrifices made for the good of all have tremendous power to undo the effects of evil – and so we practice civility even when the rest of the world traffics in mean and rude. Contrary to the bumper sticker, acts of kindness ought not to be random – for the Christian, they are our lifestyle.

As Christians, we are able to choose civility because we have the capacity to see every human being through the eyes of God. Red, yellow, black, brown and white – rich and poor and in between – male and female – young and old and middle age – every last human being carries within them the image of God and are therefore of inestimable value... so valuable that Jesus came and walked the earth and died for them... just as he did for you and for me. And so every last one of God's precious children is to be honored and respected – even when the honor and respect is not returned. While a rude comment to the cashier, an impatient grimace at the person struggling across the street, a blaring honk at the too slow driver may seem like no big deal may even seem well-deserved, they are not options for people of God... it is not so much the grand gesture, but rather the little things that tell us what really resides in our heart, what we really think of our neighbor, and in the end what we really think of ourselves.

VII. IMAGINE A WORLD

Imagine a world where civility, simple thoughtfulness, everyday kindnesses, and the giving of grace were the norm rather than the exception.

Sam Proctor, minister of Ebenezer Baptist Church in New York City was on an elevator in a pretty rough section of town when a young woman entered. Rev. Proctor

tipped his hat to her and the woman immediately because hostile. “Why are you tipping your hat at me?” she demanded? “It’s patronizing and insulting and demeaning for you to be tipping your hat at me!”

“Well ma’am, if you really want to know why, I’ll tell you, but we’ll have to get out of the elevator first, because it will take me a minute to explain.” When they got off the elevator, he said: “I wanted you to know that if a man got into that elevator and tried to push you around, he would have to deal with me. I wanted you to know that if that elevator got stuck between floors, even though I would be able to climb out, I wouldn’t do that until I got you out first. I also wanted you to know that if you got sick in that elevator, I wouldn’t get off at my floor. I’d stay with you until you got help. Frankly ma’am, it would have take just too long to say all that to you when you got on, so I just tipped my hat instead.”⁵

My friends, we are on this train, in this world, together – whether we see it as an elevator-ride, a train-ride or a journey through space on a shared planet, we are in it together, and God has let us know what it means to be good traveling companions. We alone have the power, one little tip of the hat at a time, one moment of not retaliating on the expressway, one instance of remembering that our children are watching us to learn how to behave like adults, to alter the course of a person’s day, and maybe their life.

Paul told the Corinthians what they had been doing wrong, Jesus told them how they might do it right – he summed it up rather nicely with the words: “love one another as I have loved you.” Imagine a world – imagine a future – imagine even a day at the office or a trip to the mall based on that. And then live that way, one act of kindness... one little decision at a time to put the other first...

Amen and amen.

¹ Roy Rivenburg, *The Mean Season*, LA Times, July ‘95

² *civilis*

³ Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy*

⁴ As told by Rabbi Raymond Zwerin in *Confronting Evil*, September 2001

⁵ *ibid.*