

Civility
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
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The Christian church in the city of Corinth was rent asunder by conflict. Conflict arising from the members following various leaders with differing interpretations of the Gospel. Paul, as the founding pastor of the church, wrote a series of letters to the congregation in hopes of ending the conflict. But he didn't write in platitudes. The letters to the Corinthians that have been included within the New Testament express Paul's grief and anger, his doubts about the effectiveness of his pastoring if they have so sorely misunderstood his teaching, and multiple moments where he challenges them when they are wrong. Then he ends one of the letters with a series of imperatives. We hear for ourselves St. Paul's words to the followers of Jesus:

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

For the word of God in scripture.
For the word of God among us.
For the word of God within us.
Thanks be to God.

In August I planned, in discussion with the church staff, the worship for this autumn. As we always do, we try to respond to what we perceive as the needs of the congregation. Good worship arises from the thoughts, ideas, talents, and needs of the people.

Everyone seemed troubled by a rancorous, even frightening, election. And so I decided that in the weeks leading up to the vote our worship series would explore the topic "Who Are We," reminding us of core values of our faith. This was also an easy way to make sense of the variety of special recognitions that come in the autumn calendar—World Communion Sunday in which we remind ourselves of our intimate connections with all people, Access Sunday in which we remind ourselves of our concern and advocacy for persons with disabilities, Children's Sabbath in which we are reminded of the needs of children, not just our own children, but poor and disadvantaged children, Reformation Sunday in which I proclaimed what for me are the most basic truths of the gospel—our sinfulness and our salvation—,and All Saints Sunday in which we honor our dead and remind ourselves of our eternal hope.

But looking ahead at the calendar, this Sunday was the only one without a special emphasis. It was also the Sunday after the rancorous election. What to do that Sunday? And at my recommendation we chose this text from 2 Corinthians and decided to call today "Civility

Sunday,” so that we could remind ourselves, whatever the election outcome, that we, as followers of Jesus are called to lives of grace, love, and fellowship with one another.

A month ago we chose the music. We had a long conversation about our final hymn. When we sing a patriotic hymn much thought goes into it. “America the Beautiful” was written by Katherine Lee Bates, a Congregationalist. And like many Congregationalists of the late 19th century she was animated by a concern for the social gospel, the idea that the gospel message isn’t only about the afterlife but about this life and about our work to make this world more just and peaceful. What people often fail to notice is that this is a social gospel hymn. She prays for God’s grace because the nation needs it. She prays for God to mend the nation’s flaws. She mentions the tears of the hurting that need to be assuaged. This patriotic song is not a triumphalist song. Rather, it expresses the best of our faith tradition and its hopes for society.

And on one tangential note, Bates may have been a lesbian. She lived most of her adult life with another woman.

So the hymns were picked weeks ago. The prayers were also written before election day. This worship service, then was fully designed before anyone knew what the results of the vote count would be.

My task today as your pastor is in some ways quite easy. I have only to remind you of basic moral values. We should be kind to one another. We should be gracious to one another. We should live in peace. And when we find this difficult, we should remember that the power of a loving God works through us to make this fellowship possible.

Those few sentences are the main goal of this sermon. But they aren’t sufficient. If they were, I’d read the text, that paragraph, and then sit down. However, my task today is actually quite difficult. I’ve been preaching for 28 years and my preaching responsibility today is one of the most difficult of my ministry. The reason being that a significant portion of my congregation is grieving and afraid, while others are not. And I have puzzled this week with how to thread that needle of vastly differing emotions. I have spent days reflecting and praying on what were the proper and best words to proclaim this morning.

On Thursday I called the Rev. Dr. David Breckenridge, the Senior Minister of First Baptist Church of Memphis. David was my boss in my first ministry job, where I worked as his associate. He remains a dear friend and a trusted mentor. What was his advice? Well, first he told me that he wasn’t preaching this Sunday, and I told him he was lucky. Then, he gave me two good bits of advice.

First. Not everyone is grieving, but some people are grieving. And we church people know that when our friends are grieving, we care for them. We listen to them. We bring them food and hold their hands. We feel for them and with them. And so if any portion of a congregation is grieving the entire congregation ought to do what they normally do when they are expressing sympathy.

His other advice was this. As a preacher you generally do your best to try to speak for everyone. Today you can’t do that, because not everyone is feeling the same thing. Therefore, speak for yourself. Share your own testimony, what you are feeling and why. “No one can fault a word a personal testimony,” he said.

I thanked him for his advice and told him if anyone disliked the sermon then I’d give them his phone number.

I am a gay man married to a biracial man. Michael is the son of a Filipino immigrant mother. Michael works in the African-American community, and together we are raising an adopted son of Mexican descent.

For years I hid in the closet. Lacking the courage and the integrity to be open about my own sexuality, fearing for my livelihood and whether I could ever realize my hopes and dreams. My story is a triumphant one. I came out. I remained a minister. I fell in love. God blessed us with a son. And we've done all of that while living in very conservative states, as we viewed our calling to be to remain in places where life was more difficult for us in order that we might do the hard work of changing the world.

And we succeeded. We have lived in the last few years in the euphoria of victory. We had finally changed the hearts and minds of the majority of the American public. We had won most of our civil rights and viewed it as inevitable that we would complete the task in short order. And more importantly we finally lived as free people. Let me explain what I mean.

Michael and I began dating in Oklahoma. A place where elected officials and prominent pastors routinely speak evil of gay people. Some call us worse than cancer, worse than terrorists, some call for our execution. And while we lived there the Aryan Brotherhood, in an initiation rite, kidnapped and horrifically murdered a gay man who happened to be a faithful and active member of the Presbyterian Church.

Do you know the courage that it takes to hold the hand of the person you love, in public, in a place like that? No, most of you have no clue what kind of courage that takes. But I do. My life required that courage every single day.

But the last few years have been different. I haven't looked cautiously around me before first taking Michael's hand. I quit worrying about my physical safety. I had begun to live normally, as a free person. I didn't wake up one day and decide to do that, this new normal just slowly materialized. In fact, I'd never even thought about it till this week. This week, when I found myself looking around cautiously again before taking Michael's hand.

On September 11, 2001 as sad as I was, I never feared for my own physical safety or well-being, but this week I did. This week I have been inconsolably sad and unimaginably terrified.

Not because my candidate didn't win and another candidate did. That's par for the course and largely irrelevant to what I'm talking about. Politics is not what I'm talking about. I was a Republican for half of my adulthood and still think George Herbert Walker Bush was the best president of my lifetime.

What frightened me in this election is that extreme elements of our society felt empowered. I mean the actual racists and bigots and homophobes. I know everyone who voted for Donald Trump isn't a racist and bigot and homophobe, so I'm not painting with a broad brush. But those folk have felt empowered and this week those folk felt that their hatred was vindicated. This is a consequence my family must now live with.

And then my own pain became greater as I did my job of pastoring and began to hear from you and colleagues and friends about your pain. I will limit myself to four examples.

On Wednesday I spoke with an HIV positive man afraid for his own life, because the Affordable Care Act is what finally provided affordable health insurance for people who are HIV positive. He could not comprehend why some people had chosen to endanger his life.

On Thursday I provided pastoral care for a young woman, a survivor of sexual assault, for whom the campaign resurfaced all her trauma and who began having panic attacks on Tuesday night, which continued through the week, because, as she said, "I fear that sexual assault will become the new normal."

On Thursday Jim Harmon provided pastoral care for a grandmother whose son married a Muslim woman and is raising two Muslim grandkids, both of whom have been bullied by fellow students and who now fear going to school or playing in the park in their neighborhood.

And that same day Katie Miller had a friend, a preschool teacher who said that in her preschool classroom a white boy went up to a Muslim kid and said, "You need to leave our country."

These are the horrors I have encountered as a pastor this week.

And, so, I need the things St. Paul is writing about. Peace, harmony, grace, love, fellowship. I need people to sympathize with my grief and my pain. I need that. And I'm not the only one here who does. The Hebrew prophets teach us that the path to hope actually runs through lament. Laments that must be expressed publicly, as the great bible scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us.

I am at my core a courageous, optimistic, and hopeful person. I know where I will end up. Working with other people, including those I have political disagreements with. I respect democratic processes and believe progress is made through listening to one another and compromising.

Civility is not about platitudes and ignoring hard truths. If we are to be the people the apostle Paul wants us to be, people who live in agreement and peace, people who demonstrate love, grace, and fellowship, then we must also listen to each other. I know I have a lot more listening I need to do. Hopefully you have heard me. This is my testimony.