

Choosing Kind

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Luke 17:20-21 (Good News Translation) ²⁰ Some Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come. His answer was, "The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. ²¹ No one will say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!'; because the Kingdom of God is within you."
- Romans 12:9-13 (Good News Translation) ⁹ Love must be completely sincere. Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another warmly as Christians, and be eager to show respect for one another. ¹¹ Work hard and do not be lazy. Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion. ¹² Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times. ¹³ Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Be respectful, choose kind, rise to the level of love.

Pretty friendly place, this church, don't you think? I imagine you were welcomed with a smile as you came in this morning. Maybe a handshake or a hug. If you've not been here much before, someone may have asked you a question or two without trying to make you feel like you're being interrogated. As is the case with most houses of worship, this place is characterized by a spirit of welcome, hospitality, openness, and respect.

But what would the vibe be if, say, you walked into the baggage claim area at an airport, or a grocery store the day before Thanksgiving, or you were exiting a parking deck at the end of a workday, or you were at a public meeting about a controversial matter? Would you expect smiles and waves? Sadly, you'd be more likely to encounter elbows pushing their way toward the luggage conveyor belt and baggage-laden passengers banging their way past you in their hurry to find their car or shuttle. You'd be more likely to sit in your car trying to enter the unrelenting line of vehicles also trying to exit the parking deck, your wait punctuated by horn toots and hand gestures and glares. At the public meeting you'd likely encounter one part of the room muttering under their breath about the other part of the room – no matter which side of the room you selected.

Our society beyond these walls doesn't achieve the level of respectful relationships that we strive for within these walls. Civility has been set aside by many as a quaint but archaic and unproductive manner of human interaction.

Forms of uncivil behavior that have become commonplace include:

- Interrupting and talking over others who have the floor
- Insults as well as overgeneralized... character criticisms and attributions
- Use of aggressive, sarcastic, or demeaning language and tone
- Refusal to acknowledge the good points of others¹

¹ Thomas G. Plante Ph.D., ABPP, "Is Civility Dead in America? We seem to be living in a more and more uncivil society. We don't have to." *Psychology Today*, posted Jul 11, 2016 at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/do-the-right-thing/201607/is-civility-dead-in-america>, accessed 6/6/2018

“Sadly, we seem to be living in an increasingly uncivil community. From [national] politics to random internet comments, there seems to be more and more rude, demeaning, insulting, and aggressive language and behavior in our society.”²

In the words of a newspaper reporter,

Incivility has become a pervasive part of our culture as we watch television shows where more words are bleeped out than left in, “road rage” has become part of our lexicon, sports figures feel free to behave badly (and parents are emboldened to scream obscenities at volunteer coaches), workplace violence no longer makes the front page, teachers and schools are routinely sued by students and parents asserting their “rights,” and shouting over your opponent replaces honest dialogue.³

The consequence of being on the receiving end of selfish, rude behavior is not merely the momentary bruising of one’s feelings. According to an article in *Psychology Today*,

Research on the topic of incivility has found that mental and physical health, worker productivity and employee retention, customer relations, and so forth all greatly suffer when work and social environments are uncivil. And there is social contagion with incivility in that if uncivil behavior occurs and is not confronted by corrective feedback or consequences, it tends to be more readily repeated and spreads to others. Additionally, observational learning theory suggests that... when celebrity CEOs, ...high-ranking politicians, sports stars, and Hollywood celebrities behave in uncivil ways (and get away with it) it gets modeled and thus repeated by others.

...Civil behaviors that we may wish to encourage, embrace, and reinforce include:

- Thinking before speaking
- Focus[ing] on facts rather than beliefs and opinions
- Focus[ing] on the common good rather than individual agendas
- Disagreeing with others respectfully
- An openness to others without hostility
- Respectfulness of diverse views and groups
- A spirit of collegiality
- Offering productive and corrective feedback to those who behave in demeaning, insulting, disrespectful, and discriminatory ways.⁴

If you read the book or saw the movie “Wonder” about ten-year-old Auggie born with a significant facial deformity, you may remember that story was about how people chose to react to this person who looked so very different from anyone else. The message of the story is that we all have make choices in how we react and relate, and the story encourages the reader or viewer to “Choose Kind” as their default way of treating people.

So I’ve mentioned a methodology for civility outlined by *Psychology Today*. I’ve suggested a simple way for choosing civility as presented in “Wonder,” the story about the boy with the profound facial deformity. And as followers of the way of Jesus, Christian scriptures suggest other approaches available to us as well.

When writing a letter to the Christians in Rome, St. Paul the apostle presented his proposal for civility, for respectful living. Romans 12:9 presents probably the toughest challenge.

² Cathy Young, “Will we ever have civility in American political discourse?” 06/22/17 12:00 PM EDT
<http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/media/338966-will-we-ever-have-civility-in-american-political-discourse>

³ Susan Dench, “The new normal: A lack of civility,” February 19, 2014 at
<http://susandench.bangordailynews.com/2014/02/19/conservatives/the-new-normal-a-lack-of-civility/>, accessed 6/6/2018

⁴ Plante, “Is Civility Dead in America?....”

He wrote, “Love must be completely sincere. Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good.” Was Paul actually encouraging the reaction of hate? No, the use of that word is an example of how ancient languages commonly used hyperbole, exaggeration for emphasis.⁵ We don’t need to fume with hatred about situations or persons that seem to want to undercut us. But neither do we have to ignore them and allow them to have their way with us.

Then Paul addressed the root issue of respectful, civil relationships. He wrote,
¹⁰Love one another warmly as Christians, and be eager to show respect for one another. ¹¹Work hard and do not be lazy. Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion. ¹²Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times. ¹³Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers.

Love. Respect. Be deliberate. Be mindful of God. Be joyful. Patient. Prayerfully attuned to God’s will. Be generous. Be hospitable. Those are all choices we can make, actions we can take to initiate and encourage civility in our homes, our workplaces, the marketplace, anyplace.

The words of Jesus also reveal a resource available to us, a resource empowering us to persevere in choosing kindness when the forces all around us are urging us to fend for ourselves, to ignore the needs or feelings of others, to badmouth anyone who disagrees with us. Jesus reminds us that God’s will for us is peace and prosperity, harmony and well-being. That is our vision of the Kingdom of God, and in Luke Chapter 17 Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is already within us.

Here’s what happened. Luke wrote,

²⁰Some Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come. His answer was, “The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. ²¹No one will say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’; because the Kingdom of God is within you.”

Now here’s what I want you to notice. The Pharisees were a group within the Jewish religious community of ancient Israel. They were sticklers for tradition. They weren’t much for change or innovation in religious practice. They were quite confident that their approach to religion was correct and anyone else with a different or innovative approach was wrong... and that included Jesus. So it’s fair to say that they were opponents of Jesus.

But Jesus didn’t condemn them, or post a scathing Tweet about them, or “T.P.” their houses. He actually told them, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” Even the Pharisees – his opponents – have been given access by God to achieve God’s will of peace and prosperity, harmony and well-being. Jesus was showing respect for the “other,” whether that be a Pharisee or stranger or foreigner or a person who is different in some way. The Kingdom of God is within them, Jesus told them. That means God gives them – and us – the capacity to overcome obstacles and to remove barriers that separate people. God enables us to bring people together.

That sounds mighty lofty. What does it look like in real life? I want you to hear from Flannery Costello. You know her parents Audra and Kevin, and her grandparents Susan and Ray Variakojis. Flannery just finished 6th grade at Rocky River Middle School. This past year she entered an essay in the 10th Annual Stop the Hate competition presented by the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Beachwood, and her essay was one of the essays chosen as an award-winner. She wrote about the power of civility in the everyday life of a middle-schooler, and I’m so happy that she’s agreed to read her essay this morning.

It was a few weeks before the 2016 Presidential election. Tempers were rising and the angry words from debates hung in the air like thick, dark clouds of smoke. One of my closest friends, Anna*, and I were leaving school one day as she told me our friend Quinn was being excluded for her beliefs about the election. At first I

⁵ Tekton Apologetics, “Does Luke 14:26 Teach Literal Hate?” <http://www.tektonics.org/gk/jesussayshate.php>, accessed 6/6/2018.

didn't really understand what was going on: the girls who were hurting Quinn always seemed nice to me. But, intentionally leaving someone out is not nice. As we left school every day, Anna would tell me it happened again and again and again.

At lunch one day, as I found my seat with a few of my friends, Quinn chose to sit with us. Apparently, the girls who were being unkind to her saved all the seats at Quinn's usual table for people that didn't even exist. They refused to let her sit with them. Because of this, she walked with her head down and talked in a small voice. We welcomed Quinn at our table because even though we may not have had the same beliefs, she was still a nice person. As I continued to sit with Quinn at lunch, other people began to sit with us as well and, as a result, I made a ton of new friends. Simply including someone led me to meet so many nice people.

If this were to happen again in the future, instead of just including Quinn I would stand up for her. I might tell the mean girls to stop or to please include my friend. From this experience I learned that people I thought I didn't have much in common with became my friends, and people I thought would be my friends turned out not to be very nice. I learned how to choose kind and made a whole lot of friends in the process.⁶

The author of that *Psychology Today* article about civility in America concluded by proposing the kind of approach that Flannery described in her essay. He wrote,

We can all do our part to treat others as we wish to be treated and to be respectful and compassionate to everyone (even those with whom we disagree). While there are no simple answers, if we can work together to create a culture and environment where all (and I really do mean all) interactions (in person and online) are conducted with respect and compassion and that people who don't behave in a civil manner are provided with corrective feedback, perhaps we can start to turn the tide in our increasingly uncivil culture.⁷

That's the recommended approach from a psychological viewpoint.

St. Paul has given us concrete suggestions on showing love, respect, mindfulness, joy, patience, prayerfulness, generosity, hospitality...

Jesus has assured us that the building blocks of the Kingdom of God already can be found within all of us...

And Flannery has described how we can take the guidance of Paul and the assurance of Jesus and incorporate it into our everyday living.

Now it's our turn to "Choose Kind."

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⁶ Essay by Flannery Costello, 2018, in the Youth Speak Out competition of the 10th Annual Stop the Hate Award program by the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage, Beachwood, Ohio

⁷ Plante, "Is Civility Dead in America?..."