

Sermon, Greg Renstrom
October 4, 2009

CAN WE BE CIVIL IN A CULTURE THAT IS OFTEN CONTENTIOUS?

“But passing through the midst of them he went away.”
St. Luke 4.30

Can we be civil in a culture that is often contentious? Can we? Can we be kind and decent in a culture where people are often saying things and doing things that are combative and sometimes even destructive? Can we extend our hand in grace and peace when people are shaking their fists in anger and rage? Can we? Can we be civil in a culture like that?

Simply stated, that is our topic for today, being civil in a culture that is often, not always but often, contentious. It's a pertinent topic. You need to know that I have a high opinion of human nature and a high opinion of our culture. And yet, everywhere you look, you see contention and contentiousness, in the political world and corporate world and academic world. You even see it in the one place where you wouldn't expect to see it at all. You see it in the church. Even in the Body of Christ, you see tensions and divisions. Even in the church. It is relevant. It is also spiritually important. We are followers of Jesus. He expected his followers to be instruments of peace. And at the very least, that means instruments and channels of civility too. That makes all this hugely important.

Can we be civil in a culture that is often contentious? Can we? Can we? Of course, we can. We can all be civil. And I can say that because it has happened. We have all seen it happen. We have seen people whom you would expect to be combative and fiercely competitive instead be civil and considerate. Everywhere you go these days, people are naturally talking about Lincoln. This is Lincoln's bicentennial year. He was born in 1809. Lincoln shaped the shape of American political and social and cultural life. People sometimes forget that on the same that on the same that Lincoln was born in America, Charles Darwin was born in England. He changed the shape and scope of the natural world. Darwin was a person of supreme civility. In the late eighteenth fifties, before he published *Origin of the Species*, Darwin received a copy of a scientific study that a friend had written. He asked Darwin to read it and offer constructive criticism before its publication. Darwin was staggered by what he read. It was the gist of Darwin's work. Somebody had gotten there ahead of him. He offered to withdraw *Origin of the Species* from publication, lest he be seen to have acted in an unkind, uncharitable, uncivil way. And it was only at the urging of other colleagues that he went ahead and published his monumental work.¹ Closer to home, a few years ago, during a rancorous session of our State legislature, I asked a very perceptive observer of our political scene if there were any conspicuous examples of civility. Yes there were, she told me. Mindy Greiling is an extremely civil person in the House of Representatives. John Marty is an extremely civil person in the Senate. And some of you may remember that Governor Elmer Anderson was a supremely civil person in the Governor's office. So it can be done. People can be civil. And when you look at people who are civil, you see that they have some very basic things in common that are keys to civility.

¹ People who are civil live with a *consciousness* of civility. They seem to be conscious of what it means to be civil. If you look up the word “civility” in the dictionary, you see that it means “courtesy; politeness; consideration”. And there is truth to that. But isn't real civility something more than that? Isn't civility the capacity to be kind and decent, to be gracious and sensitive? Isn't real civility the capacity to treat people with respect and care and, even perhaps, real reverence. People who are civil seem to understand that. Before they say or do anything, they have a consciousness of civility that guides them.

In the nineteen fifties, Margaret Chase Smith came to the forefront of American political life. She was a Republican Senator from Maine during the early days of McCarthyism. Some of you remember the whole period. Joseph McCarthy was a belligerent bully. Like most bullies, nobody seemed to challenge him or his belligerence. Joseph McCarthy seemed to prey on the growing sense of social and political paranoia. On June

1, 1950, Senator Smith stood up in the Senate and appealed to her colleagues for sanity. She begged them, in one of the most dramatic speeches ever delivered on the floor of the Senate, to end the cruelty and hysteria and contentiousness that were consuming America. Her decency carried the day. It wasn't the end of McCarthy or McCarthyism. But it was the beginning of the end. In the midst of political controversy, she had a consciousness to civility. It is one key to civility. Consciousness.

2 Also, people who are civil live out a *commitment* to civility. People who are civil are committed to it. They have to be. It takes patience and perseverance to be kind and decent and gracious. Nine times out of ten, people are committed to it because they know how vital it is. After all, civility isn't merely a desirable attribute or admirable trait. Civility is powerful. It has the power to keep people going and keep people together when they are being drawn apart by huge differences. Civility is one of the most powerful, and powerfully redemptive, influences in the world. And it takes commitment to put it into action.

In the nineteen sixties, John XXIII was one of the most influential and pivotal figures of the age. We don't talk much about him anymore. But he was stunning. He was this delightfully cheerful person who seemed to take Jesus literally when it came to goodness and grace. The Catholic Church was not united at every point. There were deep tensions and deep divisions between the activists and quietists, the traditionalists and innovators, the conservatives and liberals. He convened the Second Vatican Council and, almost by the spirit of his own civility, he brought the Catholic Church into a new day. He was committed to charity and civility. And it showed. That's another key to real civility. Commitment.

3 And, people who are civil live in a *climate* of civility. That is the decisive thing. If I may paraphrase the *Book of Acts*, they live and move and have their being in a climate of civility. After all, it takes an atmosphere that can nurture civility and encourage civility and strengthen civility. It takes an environment, a spiritual home or sacred place, that can somehow channel all the resources and the spiritual energies that are necessary to be civil and remain civil and sustain civility for the long haul. Only a climate of civility can do that.

In the nineteen seventies, Gerald Ford suddenly became President. Nobody had expected him to become President. But nobody expected Richard Nixon to resign under a cloud in 1974. Gerald Ford had been a conservative Republican member of Congress for years. He had a capacity, during those congressional years, to be petty and vindictive. In 1970 or 1971, after the Senate refused to confirm two of Richard Nixon's appointees to the Supreme Court, Gerald Ford led an attempt to impeach Justice William O. Douglas. It was spite, pure and simple. Ford regretted it. But then, something happened to Gerald Ford. He became a person, as one commentator noted when he died, of "innate decency." What a legacy. When he pardoned Richard Nixon in 1974, it ended any hopes he had for re-election. But he gave the American people probably the greatest spiritual act of the twentieth century. He lived and breathed and moved in a climate of civility. That's the other key to civility. Climate.

All that is good in principle, but carry it further. We belong to a religious tradition that believes in charity, decency, mercy, and peace. We have a special responsibility to be instruments of civility. What can we do to create and cultivate real civility in our culture? What can we do? Be specific. We can do three things. *Practice civility in your life*. Practice it in things you say and do. *Pray for civility*. Literally. When you are in a tight, potentially conflicted, place, pray that you will have the grace to be calm. Pray that you will feel the presence of Jesus next to you, helping you to be calm. *Personify civility too*. Be a model of what it means to be kind and thoughtful and grace. You can make a huge difference by doing just that. Practice it. Pray for it. Personify it.

Can we be civil in a culture that is often contentious? If this isn't clear, may I make one more suggestion? Remember Jesus. Near the beginning of his ministry, he went home to Galilee. He spoke at the synagogue. What he said so outraged the people that they wanted to throw him off a cliff. Do you remember what he did? He quietly walked away. If you can hold your temper and your tongue when people are against you, you will be civil. Near the end of his life, he went to Gethsemane. Judas, the betrayer, approached him that he might be arrested. Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, "Friend, why are you here?" Friend. Friend. If you can see even in an adversary the possibility of friendship, of that person being a friend, you will be civil. And the world will be blessed by you and your civility.

1. Ferris, from an unpublished sermon, "*From One World to the Next.*"