

More Than Civil

Rev. Dr. Michael S. Piazza

World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2018

Romans 12:9-21/Mark 10:13-16

On the first Sunday of October in 1936, during a time of fear and growing tension, World Communion Sunday was celebrated for the first time in Presbyterian churches in the United States and overseas. Other denominations were invited to participate, and the idea has spread over the decades.

A table that spreads around the world, to which all people are welcomed, is the answer to Jesus' prayer "that we may all be one." Nothing could be more counter-cultural than this lovely image, of course.



How do we all sit together at the table in community, love, and grace when we live in a culture that is increasingly fractured?

Sometimes our political tribes seem to be more important than our families. I've heard a dozen people say they don't want to go home for Thanksgiving because they won't be able to hold their tongues. People no longer leave or join churches because of theological or spiritual content. These decisions now are made most often in the context of our political tribes.



In a 1968 commencement address at Cornell University, Cabinet Secretary John W. Gardner noted that many institutions, are "caught up in a savage crossfire between unloving critics and uncritical lovers." That was true in the tumultuous 1960s, and may be even truer today, because, as Mark Twain observed, "History doesn't repeat, but it does rhyme."

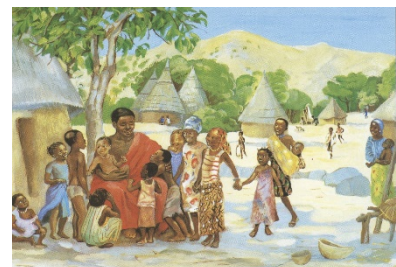
The challenge raised by the table standing in our midst is how do we create sacred community in a society that is so fractured that basic civility is increasingly rare?

The Bible talks about values like humility, courtesy, patience, and integrity. Those are the traits of a good person, but they also are vital if a democratic society is to survive. Listen to this morning's first lesson from Romans as it is paraphrased in the modern translation *The Message*:



*Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be people who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. ... Help the needy; **be inventive in hospitality**. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. ... Don't hit back; discover beauty in everybody. As much as possible, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, feed that person, or thirsty, give them a drink. Your generosity will surprise them. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil **by doing good**.*

Can you imagine if people in Washington or Hartford took this teaching seriously? Can you imagine what would happen if people in New Canaan did? Calls for greater civility have come from many quarters, but, frankly, I think our faith requires more than mere civility. It requires kindness, humility, and empathy. It requires SOMEONE to say, "Discourtesy, disrespect, and disdain are an unchristian, and even sinful, way to treat another person who is also of sacred worth." It is why



Jesus blessed, and calls us to bless, all God's children and to treat everyone as souls who are blessed.

Christians are called to bless like Jesus, not to curse, even our enemies; to live with humility that allows us to regard others with empathy, even when we disagree with them.

In my readings for this sermon, I came across a phrase that lodged itself in my soul, and I've spent the week pondering what a church would look like if it went beyond civility to altruistic love. If, as people following Jesus, we seek to model a better way, we must live out our values as a **servant people** with empathy even for those with whom we disagree.



We must move *beyond mere civility* and make *love an active verb*. Believe me I know how hard that is, because, sooner or later, EVERYONE disagrees with me about something.

Let me add though, the danger here is that Christians too often have hidden behind the veil of love and allowed great evil, or injustice, or abuse to flourish. Because of our fear of offending, we remained politely silent for too long about too many evils.



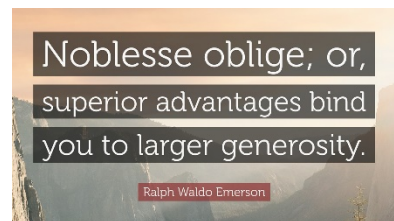
Jesus was often confrontational. He spoke out against religious and political abuses that harmed the poor and for that they crucified him. **Rosa Parks** was a person of deep faith, but she didn't politely give up her seat, and, for that, they arrested her. **Cesar Chavez** fought policies that were destroying the lives of farm workers. **Nelson Mandela** worked for *truth and reconciliation*, but he understood that truth-telling is painful.

One of the things we must remember is that civility is sometimes the privilege of the privileged. As Trevor Noah quipped, “The winner of Monopoly is never the one to upset the board.”



People who are losing their health care, or working more than one minimum wage job to feed their children, or being paid 75 percent of what a man makes for the same work, or is five times more likely to be pulled over for driving while black, don't have the luxury of always being polite, patient, or even civil. All of that is simply to suggest that we who are privileged have certain responsibilities.

The old French phrase “noblesse oblige” connotes a certain classism, but it also is a reminder that those of us who have benefited from life's blessings have an obligation to live a higher standard of empathy, humility, and generosity.



My family were poor rural Southerners. My parents are still living, and they love to tell stories of growing up without indoor plumbing. They were poor and white, but they were not poor **because** they were white. That is to say, for many of us here today, civility is not enough. Humility is a good place to begin, but it must find expression in altruistic love.

It isn't enough for us to move over and make room at the table for those long excluded to sit at OUR table. It is not sufficient simply to say that all are welcome unless we make changes to include them. We cannot be self-congratulatory for not being *one of those* churches who turn people away. No, we must make *welcome* more than just letting “them” join “us.”



Allowing others to share **our** table is not enough.

Welcome also must become an active verb. Inclusion must be proactive. We cannot simply be the church that allows everyone to come. We have an obligation

to include the historically excluded not because they need us, but because we need them. It isn't that:



- I tolerate you even though you are wrong; it is that I listen to you because, in my humility, I acknowledge that I just may be wrong or have something to learn.
- I help you because I have more than you; rather, we help each other because there are ways in which you are richer than me.
- I welcome you to **my** table because I'm the host; we welcome each other to a table that doesn't belong to **either of us**, but to God.



The truth of World Communion Sunday is that we all are exiled hosts. We all are wounded healers. We all are forgiven forgivers. We all are beloved lovers, and we all are hungry hosts.

There is someone in this church that has surprisingly rough hands. I love to shake their hand because they remind me of the people back in Georgia whom I love. As I said, I come from a working-class family, and

I was the first to attend college. My hands are soft, and my nails are clean and in pretty good shape. I remember as a little boy asking my grandfather why his hands were so rough and his nails dirty.



He explained, with a bit of pride, that he did manual labor, repairing engines for the railroad. The grease from the engines eventually stained the soft skin under his nails, and, though his hands were clean, they never quite looked like it. What might have been a source of embarrassment for some was a point of pride for him because he used those hands to feed his children and buy ice cream for his grandchildren.

As a person of privilege my hands almost always look clean, but they may not be. My hands are only clean if I use them to bless, to help, and to heal rather than to point, to hit, or to hurt. My friends, the clean hands of the Body of Christ ultimately must forget how to form a fist.