

Sermon Title: Civility and Christianity
Text: Galatians 5:13-26
By: Rev. Terry Carty
Date: 01-16-11
Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church
Season: Second Sunday after Epiphany

Main Point: The Church of the Apostles was founded on both divine principles and supported by civil virtue practices - civility.

Last week it was mentioned in the prayers but I didn't bring it up the tragedy in Arizona in the sermon. I didn't have to. We were still reeling at the thought of how the current political incivility may have contributed in the tragic massacre at the Gabrielle Giffords event in front of a grocery in Tucson.

But since that time the politicians have returned to publicly demonizing each other and the press has gone back to stirring it into public frenzy whenever possible. Not only that, but I took a congregation member's advice and viewed a movie that portrayed a post-apocalyptic earth in cruel chaos after all Bibles and other religious books had been destroyed.

So I spent Friday changing my sermon. Look in your worship bulletin and cross through the sermon title that would have been "Lifting, not Taking." In its place you can write "Civility and Christianity."

Reading of Paul's letter to the Galatians 5:13-26

Some of us may not be really familiar with the word "Civility." Frankly, I was not very familiar with it when I ran across an obscure document several years ago entitled "Guidelines for Civility in the United Methodist Church." It seems that by the late 1990's a number of dialogues between the conservative and liberal voices in the United Methodist Church had resulted in angry confrontations and walkouts. One of the General Commissions invited a group of people from both sides to enter into a conversation about how to come together in unity. The guidelines for civility resulted.

You may know me well enough now to know that I got curious about "Civility" and started doing some research. First I turned to the knowledge of my peers: Wikipedia - an online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. I was surprised to find that Wikipedia has a code of conduct to apply when people begin to cyber-argue over details. It's first principle is that civility will be maintained.

"Incivility consists of personal attacks, rudeness, and aggressive behaviors that disrupt the project and lead to unproductive stress and conflict."

“In general, be understanding and non-retaliatory in dealing with incivility. If others are uncivil, be understanding (people do say things when they get upset) rather than judgmental, and do not respond in kind.” This sounds like it could be Paul’s letter to the Wiki-geeks!

With further investigation I found that understandings of civility arose at the same time as republics became popular as a form of government – government by and for the people. The best known early republics were found in some of the Greek City-States and, then, they were further perfected in the Roman Republic which was the predecessor to the Roman Empire. During the almost 5 centuries of the Roman Republic the common understanding of civility dictated habits of personal living that was the foundation for society and law.

The republic in which we live today draws heavily from principles of community that were developed by the Greeks and the Romans of the republic.

To get to the point, Julius Caesar overthrew the republic and established the Roman Empire about 30 years before the birth of Christ. While Jesus and the disciples grew up in Judea under the law of Moses – not an understanding of civility – Paul grew up the son of Roman citizens – citizens of the former Roman Republic.

As Paul counseled the new Gentile Christian congregations, he relied on spiritual insight that he held in faith AND he drew deeply on a Roman Republican understanding of civility. I feel that Paul packaged the message of Jesus in the vessel of civility so the early Christians could better preserve it and teach it to others.

I may be totally off the wall on this. I did not learn it in seminary – it has come from studying the letters of Paul and my fairly recent discovery of the history of civility.

Yet I fully believe that Christians are called to champion civility in our own lives, in our communities, and in every place that our voice can be lifted. I think that civility is our historic expression of the will of God for the way we live our relationships in love.

We must stand for the personhood of others. We must insure that all views are allowed to be presented. We must avoid needless use of inflammatory words, we must remember that people are defined, ultimately, by their relationship with God; not by the flaws we think we discover in their views and actions.

Prayer: Dear God of love. Teach us your grace and let it live through us as we help others to relate to each other in civility that brings understanding among people of all faiths and viewpoints. Amen.

Guidelines for Civility in the United Methodist Church

1. Respect the personhood of others, while engaging their ideas.
2. Carefully represent the views of those with whom we are in disagreement.
3. Be careful in defining terms, avoiding needless use of inflammatory words.
4. Be careful in the use of generalizations; where appropriate offer specific evidence.
5. Seek to understand the experiences out of which others have arrived at their views. Hear the stories of others, as we share our own.
6. Exercise care that expressions of personal offense at the differing opinion of others not be used as means of inhibiting dialogue.
7. Be a patient listener before formulating responses.
8. Be open to change in your own position and patient with the process of change in the thinking and behavior of others.
9. Make use of facilitators and mediators where communication can be served by it.
10. Always remember that people are defined, ultimately, by their relationship with God; not by the flaws we discover or think we discover in their views and actions.