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“The Art of Living with Others”

2 Cor. 6:1-12

In a crowded waiting room in a doctor’s office, a woman received a call on her cell phone. She began a long conversation in a voice we could all hear. Soon we got details none of us wanted to know about the schedule she had that day, what she had for lunch, and a few problems in the family, and worst of all – why she was at the doctor’s office. Rude!

Speeding by me on K-96 was a young man in a bright red car. As he sped along, he thumbed his cigarette out the window and sparks flew near his exhaust. Rude!

We all have experienced behavior we consider rude or impolite. But likewise, we all have had good experiences, too. Is there less civility in American society now than in the past? Are manners and politeness really important? Does our faith speak to behaving in a civil manner?

Here’s what the apostle Paul has to say...

“Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don’t squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us. God reminds us,

I heard your call in the nick of time;
The day you needed me, I was there to help.

Well, now is the right time to listen, the day to be helped. Don’t put it off; don’t frustrate God’s work by showing up late, throwing a question mark over everything we’re doing. Our work as God’s servants gets validated—or not—in the details. People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly . . . in hard times, tough times, bad times; when we’re beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating; with pure heart, clear head, steady hand; in gentleness, holiness, and honest love; when we’re telling the truth, and when God’s showing his power; when we’re

doing our best setting things right; when we're praised, and when we're blamed; slandered, and honored; true to our word, though distrusted; ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all."

II Cor. 6:1-12

Civility was actually popularized in the 16th century by Erasmus, the Dutch philosopher, who wrote "On civility in children". The concept of civility is related to the words civilized and civilization. It has to do with how people live together. Its root means "member of the household".

Carter observes, "To be civilized is to understand that we live in society as in a household, and that within that household if we are to be moral people, our relationships with other people are governed by standards of behavior that limit our freedom. ***Our duty to follow those standards does not depend on whether or not we happen to agree with or even like each other.***" Have you or someone you know ever said, "I'm old enough now that I don't care about getting others' approval. I am going to live to please myself"? When we say things like this, we are ignoring our faith and what Jesus taught.

There are ways in which we are expected to relate to one another. It has to do with courtesy, but even more with respect. Individualism and self-gratification have become values of our society. But this flies in the face of what our faith teaches us. Frank Sinatra's song "I Did It My Way" mirrors our culture. There are books that tell us to make our own rules, to do what we want, to do it our way. But, the more we focus on ourselves and self-gratification, the less moral energy we have available to spend on others and the less attuned we are to others' well-being.

This selfish individualism flies right in the face of community and relationships – something Jesus talked about all the time. Pier Massimo Forni teaches Italian literature at Johns Hopkins University. Professor Forni and some of his colleagues

formed the Johns Hopkins University Civility Project. Forni ended up writing a book entitled *Choosing Civility: The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct*.

Forni says, “Life is relational. Life is what our relationships make it. Good relationships make our life good; bad relationships make our lives bad. We exist and we perceive our identity only in relation to others.” He says that we often think of good manners as what we teach children: to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ and to chew with their mouths closed. But this is a very limited view of manners.

The Latin root of “manners” is “hand”. Manners are the way something is done or handled. We have good manners when we handle others with care. Our hands can strike or they can lift, or they can soothe, they can destroy or they can heal – that’s why manners matter.

Think of Jesus’ stories – the Good Samaritan used his hands in a good way; the Prodigal child did not. The forgiving landowner behaved in a civil way; the unforgiving servant did not. The Bible is full of stories of people being gracious to guests, which is the height of good manners. This graciousness extends not only to our friends, but *especially* to “*the other*”... people we don’t know... people who we disagree with... people who are different than us... strangers, foreigners, the rejected...

Civility begins with awareness. Forni says, “Being civil means being constantly aware of others and weaving restraint, respect and consideration into the very fabric of this awareness.” To be kind, we need to begin with an interest in the well-being of others, transcending our tendency toward selfishness. Remember, we don’t have to agree with one another to offer respect, kindness and understanding. An example of this was at the graduation ceremonies at Notre Dame several years ago. President Obama was asked to be the graduation speaker. Notre Dame is a Roman Catholic university. The Roman Catholic stance on abortion is well-known. And President Obama is an advocate for choice. That made for some major controversy! Picketers, demonstrations, uproar, and all kinds of chaos resulted. But I want you to hear the President of Notre Dame’s

comments before he introduced President Obama. Remember, this is a Catholic priest, who has everything to lose by standing up in support of Obama. The grace he extended to someone with whom he disagrees is amazing.

“... More than any problem in the arts or sciences – engineering or medicine – easing the hateful divisions between human beings is the supreme challenge of this age. Of course, dialogue is never instantaneous; it doesn’t begin and end in an afternoon. It is an ongoing process made possible by many acts of courtesy and gestures of respect, by listening carefully and speaking honestly. Paradoxically, support for these actions often falls as the need for them rises – so they are most controversial precisely when they can be most helpful.

As we all know, a great deal of attention has surrounded President Obama’s visit to Notre Dame. We honor all people of good will who have come to this discussion respectfully and out of deeply held conviction.

Most of the debate has centered on Notre Dame’s decision to invite and honor the President. Less attention has been focused on the President’s decision to accept.

President Obama has come to Notre Dame, though he knows well that we are fully supportive of Church teaching on the sanctity of human life, and we oppose his policies on abortion and embryonic stem cell research.

Others might have avoided this venue for that reason. But President Obama is not someone who stops talking to those who differ with him.

Mr. President: This is a principle we share.

As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote in their pastoral constitution Gaudium et Spes: ‘Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.’

If we want to extend courtesy, respect and love – and enter into dialogue – then surely we can start by acknowledging what is honorable in others.”

There is a story with many variations about the Buddha. A delegation of seekers came to Prince Gautama to learn from his wisdom. Deeply impressed, they asked him, "Are you a god?" "No," he replied. "Are you a saint?" Again, "no." "Are you a prophet?" "No." "Well, who are you?" The Buddha replied, "I am awake."

To be awake is to be aware of the needs of others. The stories of rude behavior with which I began this sermon show that those involved were too caught up in their own needs and desires to be aware of the needs of those around them - putting their own urges before the respect of others.

I think good manners, polite and respectful behavior are also rooted in an acknowledgment of the worth of other people. That acknowledgment is at the heart of many faith traditions. And it is a substantial aspect of Christianity. Acknowledging others means affirming some imprint of God in every human life.

I am increasingly convinced that civility is the root problem for much of the world's ills. If we cannot wake up to the people around us, what hope is there for a better world, the end of injustices, and peace? In order to address issues like homelessness, prejudice, health care reform, violence against children, and other issues, we must first learn how to be civil.

We have the potential to bring some saving grace to our world – sensitivity, mercy, generosity of spirit, a courtesy so deep it amounts to beauty. We all have to summon these qualities and decide to use them in our everyday interactions.

Scott Peck, in his book *Abounding Grace*, tells us that we need more thoughtfulness behind the considerations we pay to others. Not merely the golden rule of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Peck calls this the "beginner's course." "What the advanced course teaches is: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but only if you were in their unique and very different shoes. This advanced kind of consideration has much more to do with empathy than sympathy. But do not toss it off as an easy, basically

emotional virtue. It requires a great deal of actual experience of others and the capacity to not only absorb that experience but also to think about it.”

I believe that what we try to do here at UCC is model a way of getting along with each other that is an example for the world as we would like it to be. Despite our different beliefs, our different politics, our different life choices, our different educations, our different abilities, we are trying very hard to be together the best way we can. In your bulletin, there is an insert with the principles of engagement for creating civility among peoples. It is from the National Civility Center. I would invite you to consider these principles or the quote in your bulletin as we take a moment of quiet prayer.

Resources Used:

Stinson, Jerald M. “Manners, Civility and the Art of Living with Others”. A Sermon for the First Congregational Church, Long Beach, CA (June 22, 2008)

Wohler, Reverend Alison. “A Return to Civility”. A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst (June 3, 2007)

Weissbard, Dave. “Civility 101: A Sermon.” The Unitarian Universalist Church, Rockford, IL (June 8, 2003)