

February 28, 2010

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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**Peacemaking:  
The Believer's Calling  
2. Civility**

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

3 John:1-6

When President Obama told CBS News' *60 Minutes* recently that "our country is suffering from a lack of civility," most Americans understood what he was talking about: politically heated cable news shows and Rep. Joe Wilson (the congressman who famously shouted, "You lie!" during Obama's speech to Congress) and of course those "angry mobs" that have been showing up for healthcare town hall meetings and Tea Party rallies across the country.

I don't know about you, but when I turn on the TV and see these grown people screaming at each other, I think if we don't get our civility back we are in real trouble. It would be a safe, but sad, bet that someone, somewhere in the world, is killing someone else at this very moment in the name of religion or ideology or politics.

Anyway, the press concurred with the President about his comments concerning civility. They threw in the timely headlines about Serena Williams' foul-mouthed outburst on the tennis court and Kanye West's hijacking of Taylor Swift's MTV award acceptance speech.

"There's a coarsening of the culture," the media has collectively and belatedly declared - as if Republican

political discontent started a national trend that spread to hip-hop and tennis stars.

News flash! Our society has been coarsening for at least the last decade or two. Sure, popular culture hasn't helped, but rock stars, sports stars, politicians and angry cable pundits are not the source of the deterioration of civility in the culture. We are!

Our grandparents wouldn't have put up with the lack of civility we experience daily. Why do we?

This word "civility" is defined as "politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech: *I hope we can treat each other with civility and respect.*" In early use the term denoted the state of being a citizen and hence good citizenship or orderly behavior is directly related to civility. The sense of the word denoting politeness arose in the mid-16th century.

Another way to define civility is loving your neighbor as yourself or the Golden Rule or simple good sportsmanship. The essence of sportsmanship is that in a game we do not take for ourselves special favors which we deny to other players but, making the rules equal for all, abide by them. In daily life that means that a person should always question concerning his or her conduct whether, if everybody acted on the same principle, it would be well for all.

There is no doubt, then, why it is wrong to crowd in ahead of your turn in a line at a ticket office. There is no doubt why it is wrong to join whispering campaigns about people when you do not know the facts. There is no doubt why it is wrong to exaggerate or misrepresent another's point of view in order to advance your own or to shout someone down as if talking louder or surlier will win the day. In all such cases we know well that we would not wish to be treated ourselves as we are treating others and that if everybody acted on that principle it would not be well for all. Sometimes I wonder if half the evil in the world is simply poor sportsmanship.

A couple of weeks ago I visited my daughter's family in California. It is great being a grandparent and having the opportunity to undermine parental authority. Seriously, my three grandchildren are the cutest, most intelligent and well behaved children on earth. Well, it's nice *for me* to think so. But, I am proud of how Neville and Erin are raising Kathryn, Lindsay and Natalie. More than once the action was stopped and Erin asked one of the children about their tone of voice.

An appropriate tone of voice is the beginning of civility. That's something even a toddler understands. Parents shouldn't look for celebrity role models, teachers, coaches or after-school programs to do their job. Civility starts at home.

Another positive example of civility occurred last Thursday at Blair House in Washington, D.C. Whatever your view on the current healthcare debate, it was refreshing to see our legislators talk for seven hours in polite measured tones - listening to one another as well as expressing themselves. How lamentable that such an occurrence is the exception rather than the rule.

Are you familiar with the author Karen Armstrong? She has dedicated her life to the study of religion — both from inside the walls of a convent during her seven years as a Catholic nun — and as an author of 20 books on the world's faiths from Islam to Buddhism and a best-selling book titled *The History of God*. Her examination of the commonalities of the world's faiths has brought Karen Armstrong to her current project: The Charter for Compassion.

"My work has continually brought me back to the notion of compassion," she writes. "Whichever

religious tradition I study, I find at the heart of it is the idea of feeling with the other, experiencing with the other, compassion. And every single one of the major world religions has developed its own version of the Golden Rule. Don't do to others what you would not like them to do to you."

Compassion doesn't mean feeling sorry for people. It doesn't mean pity. It means putting yourself in the position of the other, learning about the other. Learning what's motivating the other, learning about their grievances.

Last year Karen Armstrong received the \$100,000 TED prize, presented at an international conference of experts in the fields of technology, entertainment and design, for her efforts on behalf of this Charter for Compassion. It is Karen Armstrong's effort to promote the principles of the Golden Rule across the religious and global spectrum. She's hoping to counter incivility by making compassion cool.

Let me read it to you...

### **Charter for Compassion**

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women:

- to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion;
- to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate;
- to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures;
- to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity;
- to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships

and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

I recall in the movie *Forrest Gump*, the mentally challenged and physically disabled Forrest Gump (played by Tom Hanks) reminisces about the ups and downs of his unique life. Early in the movie, Forrest recalls his first day of school. He says, "You know it's funny how you remember some things, but some things you can't. I remember the bus ride on the first day of school very well."

The movie shifts back to Forrest's first day of school when, encumbered with bulky leg braces, he waddles toward the school bus. The bus door opens to reveal a scowling bus driver with a cigarette hanging from her mouth. Forrest pauses at the entrance to the bus and examines the bus driver with a look of uncertainty. The annoyed bus driver growls at Forrest, "Are you coming on?"

Forrest replies, "Mama said not to be taking rides from strangers."

Her patience waning, the bus driver gruffly responds, "This is the bus to school."

Forrest hits on a solution and says, "I'm Forrest, Forrest Gump."

The bus driver's countenance softens, and she introduces herself. "I'm Dorothy Harris."

Forrest says, "Well, now we ain't strangers anymore," and he boards the bus.

Unfortunately, the children on the bus are cold to Forrest. As Forrest begins the long trek down the bus's center aisle, he is shunned by his classmates: "Seat's taken." "Taken." "Can't sit here."

As the adult Forrest thinks back on that day, the pain on his face turns to wonder as he remembers how kindness and acceptance bubbled up amidst the rejection. "You know, it's funny what a young man recollects. 'Cause I don't remember bein' born. I don't recall what I got for my first Christmas, and I don't remember when I went on my first outdoor picnic. But, I do remember when I heard the sweetest voice in the wide world."

Next to the cutest blonde-headed girl on the bus was an empty seat. "You can sit here if you want," she said.

Forrest muses, "I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life. She was like an angel."