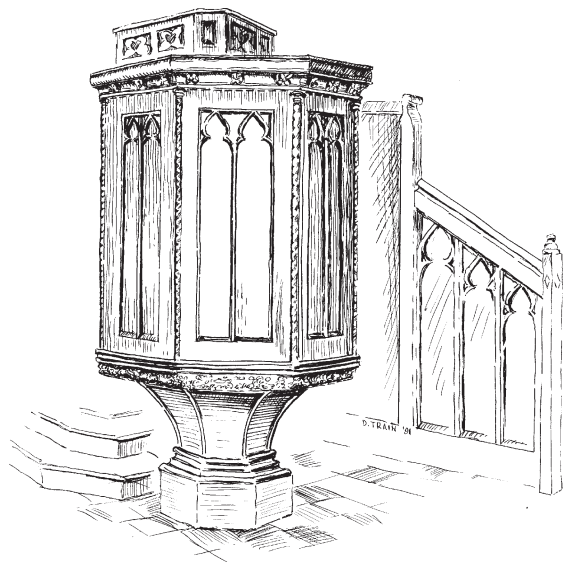


April 13, 2008

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Whether Present or Absent

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Philippians 1:27-2:16

Some of the incidents are so ludicrous you can't help but laugh - even if it's nervous laughter. There was the case in Salt Lake City, where 75-year-old J. C. King, upset that 41-year-old Larry Remm, Jr. honked at him for blocking traffic, followed Remm when he pulled off the road, hurled his prescription bottle at him, and then, in a display of geriatric resolve, smashed Remm's knees with his '92 Mercury. In up-scale Potomac, Md., Robin Ficker, an attorney and ex-state legislator, knocked the glasses off a pregnant woman after she had the temerity to ask him why he bumped her Jeep with his.

Other incidents lack even the element of black humor. In Colorado Springs, 55-year-old Vern Smalley persuaded a 17-year-old boy who had been tailgating him to pull over; Smalley decided that, rather than merely scold the lad, he would shoot him. And he did. Fatally - after the youth had threatened him. Then there was a time on Virginia's George Washington Parkway, when a dispute over a lane change was settled with a high-speed duel that ended when both drivers lost control and crossed the center line, killing two innocent motorists.

But, it's not just "road rage." The overall growing rudeness, even harshness, of American life is impossible to ignore. Your teenager brings home a CD with lewd, hostile lyrics. A political candidate in a TV ad calls his opponent a liar and a crook. A star baseball player spits at an umpire. A radio talk-show jockey insults the President - while he's sitting right there.

Yes, it's impossible to ignore the growing rudeness of American life. In fact, an overwhelming majority of Americans - 89% in a *U. S. News & World Report* poll - think incivility is a serious problem. More than three in four said it's gotten worse in the past 10 years.

Why is society less civil? The sociologists say people feel they've lost control of their lives and lost touch with their neighbors. Employers have weaker ties to workers and communities that depend on them. Can you remember not so long ago when companies like Mead and NCR and Reynolds & Reynolds had a major civic investment in the city of Dayton? Family, church, school and volunteer groups are not as strong as they once were. There is a natural fallout from all of this in the common interactions of life, they say.

I remember back in grade school what would happen when the teacher left the room for a couple of moments. "Children, continue to do your arithmetic assignment. I'll return shortly," she would say. As soon as she left the room, all hell would break loose - spit balls, hair pulling, name calling. We'd send Sean McNally to the door to serve as a lookout, so when Mrs. Mowinny returned, we'd all be back at our desks diligently working like we'd been doing that all the time she was away. It's like that in America today. The teacher has left the room and there isn't even a lookout. How many of us slow down on Far Hills when going through Oakwood? There the teacher is in the room. We know the likelihood of police radar is greater there. We act differently when someone is watching.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians at the beginning of today's reading, "Whether I'm present or absent, let your behavior be worthy of those who are pledged to Christ" (Philippians 1:27). "Your conduct must be the same whether I show up to see things for myself or hear it from a distance" (Philippians 1:27 MB). And just in case they didn't get it, he repeats himself several verses later calling for obedience "...not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence..." Just how are the Philippians to act whether Paul is present or absent? They are to be kind to one another, courteous to one another, respectful of one another. "Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand," says Paul (Philippians 2:3,4 MB).

Sometimes ministers are treated like grade school teachers: "We don't usually pray before meals, but since the pastor is with us tonight, we'll ask him to say grace." Or on the golf course: "Watch your language now. If you hit a bad shot don't curse. The minister's playing with us today." We hear things like that. Paul realizes that he must not allow those to whom he ministers to become dependent upon him. For their own health and maturity, they must stand, not lean. Paul needs no satellites whose immaturity daily confirms for him that he is a minister, and the Church certainly does not need that relationship. The Christian life is not a game of hide- and- seek with the minister. Paul's presence or absence is not the determining factor in their living out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's impossible to know for sure what Paul would say to an American public which has learned to embrace incivility. What we do know for sure is that Paul regarded as inappropriate to the body of Christ the selfish eye, the pompous mind, the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that spoke none, the heart that had little room for others, and the hand that served only the self. Such actions were a contradiction of the gospel which speaks and sings of a Christ who was first and always the servant of others.

Abraham Heschel once said, "I used to admire intelligent people. As I grow older, I admire kind people." I guess I'm getting older, too. I used to admire talented people, wealthy people, successful people. More and more I'm coming to appreciate kind people.

I remember a Director of Christian Education in the early days of my ministry whose byword was: "It's better to be kind than to be right." It seems we in America have gotten it just the reverse. There's so much mean-spiritedness.

A few years ago, back in the Clinton era, the Democrats went to the House floor with an enlarged cartoon of House Speaker Newt Gingrich as a baby in a diaper. After that, Republican Rep. Bob Dornan (R-CA), was banned from speaking on the floor for a day after he accused President Clinton of "giving aid and comfort to the enemy" during the Vietnam War. Asked to apologize, he screamed, "Hell, no! Hell, no!"

Excuse me, I know it's old fashioned, but whatever happened to good manners? Whatever happened to kindness? Whatever happened to humility? Whatever happened to courtesy? Whatever happened to common civility?

What would happen if you in your dealings with family, friends, and co-workers, chose to be kind instead of being right? Suppose the next time you had the chance to correct someone, even if their facts were a little off, suppose you resisted the temptation. I think not only would you promote a peaceful interaction, you'd notice a peaceful feeling within yourself. After all, it's impossible to feel better at the expense of someone else.

The famous Dutch Christian who was sent to a Nazi concentration camp because she hid Jews in her home, Corrie Ten Boom, was once asked if it was difficult to remain humble when she became the target of so many accolades for her Christian writing. She replied, "When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches, throwing garments on the road, and singing praises, do you think for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?"

Every ability we have is a gift, whether that ability is intelligence, or skilled hands, or able leadership or abilities as a teacher or a doctor or a musician or an athlete. The gifts themselves are worse than nothing when we forget they are gifts, and that all gifts are designed by our Creator primarily for service to others. Intelligence or leadership or wealth that forgets its source will also forget its place.

No wonder we admire kindness. It is a gift that by its definition cannot forget its function or its source.

I'd like to end this sermon like my friend and mentor Tom Long did when preaching from this pulpit a while back. He said, "Some of you like three point sermons. Well, I have three points for you today. Be kind. Be kind. Be kind."