

A Little Civility Goes a Long Way

Ephesians 4:25-5:2a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Our country has just come through a very difficult week. Yet, I'm hoping that it will turn out to also be a productive week. As you know, there was an attempted assassination of a United States congresswoman in Tucson, Arizona, a week ago on Saturday, where a crowd had gathered outside a grocery store in kind of a "meet and greet" setting. The lone gunman's rampage ended in the death of 6 innocent people, including a federal judge and a 9-year old girl, and the injuring of many others, including a bullet through the brain of the congresswoman.

The firestorm that immediately erupted after this senseless tragedy had folks pointing fingers and attempting assign blame, as always seems to be the gut level reaction, even before we have all the facts and pertinent information.

One particularly poignant editorial cartoon, which was printed in yesterday's *Tulsa World* newspaper, pictures a folding table that has a sign on it with the words, "'Congress on Your Corner' with Rep. Gabrielle Giffords." On the ground, there is a graphic portrayal of six bodies lying in a pool of blood, gun shell casings scattered around them. Flying above are vultures circling the bodies. One of the vultures coldly states, "Never let a good carnage go to waste." The vultures are labeled "Pundits" and "Partisans."

Within less than 24 hours, the race to place blame was in full force, aimed primarily on inflammatory political rhetoric.

On Wednesday of last week, President Obama spoke at a gathering in Tucson, which at times resembled a memorial service, and at times a rally. Heralded as a prime example of why he is considered one of the best orators of our day, the President, according to supporters and critics alike, took the high road by wisely avoiding laying blame.

Instead, he told that crowd, and a hurting nation, "At a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized – at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently than we do – **it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds.**"

President Obama's words echoed those written 2000 years earlier by the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul lays forth a way of living and interacting with others that reflects the teachings of Jesus. In particular, Ephesians 4:29 gives the following instruction, "**Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.**"

How many words do you suppose we hear every day that are not filled with grace? When it comes to the state of our politics in this day and age, I would say almost every word. We are a nation and a people who have forgotten how to disagree with each other in a civil way. But perhaps we were never very good at it in the first place.

Instead, **opponents are demonized**. The opinions of others are not merely “different” than our own, they are labeled not only as downright “wrong,” sometimes even “evil.”

I personally agree with the President when he warned against jumping to conclusions. “Bad things happen,” he said, “and we must guard against simple explanations in the aftermath.” I was especially pleased that he didn’t try to blame God, as we have heard time and time again in the aftermath of tragedy. And yet, I also believe that **there are consequences to the words that come out of our mouths**.

Without making a connection to the Tucson tragedy in any way, shape or form, I am among those who firmly believe that **the language of violence has no place in political discussion. Neither does it have a place in religious discussion.**

Without attempting to squelch anyone’s right to free speech, can we not try harder, a lot harder – each and every one of us – to **embrace a higher level of civility and respect**, especially toward those with whom we disagree?

The national office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) sent out a news release on Wednesday of this past week, the day of Obama’s message. It was partially to promote a book by James Calvin Davis, a college professor and ordained Presbyterian minister, entitled, “**In Defense of Civility**,” published by Westminster John Knox Press, which is associated with our denomination. Davis’s book explores religion’s role in public debate and our tendency to box others into stereotypes on the other side of our opinions. When Davis was interviewed about the events of this past week, he stated:

The tragedy in Arizona this weekend signals how desperately Americans need to commit to restoring some sanity and civility to our public discourse. It is inaccurate and offensive to attribute the actions of Jared Lee Loughner directly to the rhetoric of a specific political party. **But it seems undeniable to me that the general viciousness, violent innuendos, and mutual loathing taken for granted in our political culture right now set the scene for this kind of act.** Political violence is a powder keg that will keep going off until we figure out a different way of talking about our deepest disagreements. **Americans need to learn how to disagree civilly and fruitfully, and now is the time for religious Americans to step in and lead the way.**

I wholeheartedly agree, hence this sermon today. Again, President Obama suggested as much as well. He spoke with passion when he called on Americans to “**expand our moral imaginations**, to listen to each other more carefully, to **sharpen our instincts for empathy**, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.”

Those were beautiful words, speaking of a desire for reconciliation. They could have been spoken by Martin Luther King, Jr. himself, whose birthday – and example of non-violence – we celebrate tomorrow.

Paul Krugman, in a Thursday column in the *New York Times*, entitled, “A Tale of Two Moralities,” writes, “The real challenge we face is not how to resolve our differences – something that won’t happen any time soon – but how to keep the expression of those differences within bounds. It’s acceptable to express your opinion and to criticize the other side, but it’s not acceptable to engage in violence or to encourage others to do so.”

Concerning our political discourse, Krugman concludes, "It's not enough to appeal to the better angels of our nature. We need to have leaders of both parties – or Mr. Obama along if necessary – declare that **both violence and any language hinting at the acceptability of violence are out of bounds.**

I want to expand this line of thinking just a bit to include religious institutions and the discourse in which we engage one another. **When we hurl judgmental, condemning, and even insulting remarks against those who don't think or act the same way we do, are we not also complicit in promoting violence? Perhaps not physical violence, but certainly emotional and spiritual violence.**

President Obama stated, "**I believe we can be better.**" Not that he didn't say that we can "do" better, but rather that we can "be" better. He continued, "We may not be able to stop all evil in the world, but I know that **how we treat one another is entirely up to us.** I believe that for all our imperfections, we are full of decency and goodness, and the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us."

If all the words written by the Apostle Paul could somehow be reduced to one theme, perhaps it would be the need to **live in unity.** But just how can we do that? Something that I find helpful is to **take a break from time to time from watching and listening to those circling vultures – the extreme partisans.** Also, while volumes could be written to help work toward that goal of unity, listen again to the words Paul wrote in Ephesians 4. Reflect upon them, take them to heart, and with humility, let us each see how we might work to apply them to our own lives.

- Put away falsehood.
- Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.
- Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.
- Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.
- Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice.
- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.
- Be imitators of God, as beloved children.
- And live in love, as Christ loved us.

One final note concerning the words that come out of our mouths. In reviewing this passage from Ephesians, *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary asks, "**What is Christian speech?**" It answers, "This passage gives us a list of things that it is not. No anger, quarreling, bitterness, ruining the reputation of another, lying, deceit. **Christian speech is truthful, helpful, positive, builds up, is kind, has words of forgiveness.**

Then it offers this challenge, "**Perhaps Christians could contribute to cleaning the verbal air.** Christian speech does not mean verbally assaulting others with our religion at every turn. It does mean a higher standard of verbal interaction with others than many of us practice."

And remember, a little civility goes a long way.

Amen.