

## Civility (AKA Acting in Love)

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The scripture selections have likely tipped you off — this is a sermon about love. With the backdrop of all that is happening in our world today, I was thinking of talking about civility and how our society could benefit from engaging more intentionally in being kind to one another (I realize that's a no-brainer). Or perhaps how we could concentrate more on our listening — and specifically, our hearing — skills in order to promote constructive human interaction.

And then I thought that I might focus on the need to actively practice curiosity as a means of increasing our understanding of other people's views and values. As I was looking into these themes, I came across today's scripture lessons.

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians encourages us to: "Lead a life... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, **bearing with one another in love.**" Bearing with one another in love...

The readings helped me understand that treating each other with civility, engaging in intentional kindness, listening and hearing well, and being curious so as to increase mutual understanding, can all be considered acts of love within the context of the human experience. So, love it is.

As a society, it seems like we've had to learn a new skill in recent years — really a defense mechanism of sorts — and that is to *brace ourselves* for the day's events and subsequent media coverage. I find that I need to mentally and physically prepare for the news — that I need to take a deep breath and ensure that my body is grounded before I can take in what is happening around me, locally and globally. We are citizens of the world after all, so we have a responsibility to stay informed and be aware, don't we?

But each day brings stories of deadly violence and attacks, divisive and rancorous politics, sexism, and racism (still) — not to mention daily episodes of wild weather that are not exciting in the way that we might enjoy a good storm, but rather are indicative of the steady march of climate change. All of this can feel like an onslaught to our senses and sensibilities.

And this week, dubbed "America in Crisis" by ABC News, brought us new occurrences of violence that are nearly impossible for us to fathom, and leave us wondering if we're really living in the year 2016 — how can things like this be happening today?

At the same time that incidents of hateful words and harmful acts seem to be ever increasing, I see another kind of insidious creep taking place around us. It's a feeling of helplessness, or even defeat — that sometimes we think we couldn't possibly change the course of the negative dynamics in society, or even bring impact to any single issue.

The danger of that thinking, of course, is that we could allow ourselves to slide ever so slightly into our own personal spaces of complacency, resigned to a seeming reality that our individual values and deeds are futile against such strong forces.

But, if we allow that inclination to become our reality, I think it would be a great collective mistake. As idealistic as it sounds, perhaps we can work to prevent that potential slide into a defeated sense of complacency and re-awaken our belief in individual and community impact through love. Don't worry; I'm not going to go all Woodstock on you 😊

We have talked a lot about love. Thousands of years ago, the word Love was written in the bible over 500 times (depending on which version you read). Today, it's on highway signs, bumper stickers, all over Facebook and Instagram, and people are writing and blogging about it more than ever. One of my favorites is Love is Love is Love. I'm not really sure what it means, but I like saying it.

After the Orlando shooting, President Obama said, "In the face of hate and violence, we will love one another." And after this particularly painful week, he said "this is not who we want to be." I know I should be quoting Jesus, and not the President, in a sermon, but I think that his message is germane here 😊

Because we're not quite sure what else to do, it seems lately we've been engaged in a communal societal plea to return to some fundamental human practices — founded in love — that we used to know better and exercise more freely.

As you know, our church is home to the Neighborhood Cooperative Nursery School which serves 3 to 5 year olds. They lovingly call themselves "A school of families." There's a big sign when you first walk in the doors downstairs that says only three things: Listen. Be Kind. Do your Best. Apparently, this is the school's mantra — it pops up as a banner on its website, where it also says "Welcome to the Neighborhood" — and so it must serve as a set of foundational principles as the caregivers engage in shaping one of society's most malleable, and therefore most promising, sectors of humanity — preschoolers.

The school's philosophy implies that these are choices — Listen. Be Kind. Do your best — and that each child not only has the innate ability to express love in this way, but can also make individual decisions about when and how to employ these God-given skills. How empowering for those young people!

Most of us don't have signs in our houses reminding us to act in love — Listen, Be Kind, and Do your Best — so it's easy for us to get caught up in our own, and the world's troubles, and forget.

A couple Saturday's ago, I had to borrow my neighbor's car to go to the transfer station. I packed up her recycling, trash, and yard waste, along with ours, and headed down with a loaded car. Near the recycling area, I found a spot in one of the busy lanes and made several trips back and forth to the car, and finally was ready to move on to the trash conveyor area. But I couldn't get my neighbor's Toyota Hybrid Highlander to move

forward. We have a Prius, so I know the drill — got the key, seatbelt, foot on the brake, push the button — and although the car would turn on, it wouldn't drive forward. I tried the whole routine again – nothing.

On my third try, the car behind me started to blare its horn at me. It was crowded and as you know, the general understanding is that you need to keep moving — except that I couldn't. So, after honking, the driver of the car came over to my car and started banging on my window. I put it down and he yelled at me several times “You've boxed me in!” “Get moving!”

I felt certain in that moment that he wasn't doing his best 😊

And because I had been thinking about these kinds of things, I said to him “All your honking and yelling won't get either one of us out of here. Maybe you can ask me how you can help me instead?” Although I could see his bewilderment at my response, I went ahead and described my situation. And after he took it in, he jumped right into problem-solving mode.

He put his head right inside my car and we went through it — got the key, seatbelt, foot on the brake, push the button — he also had a Hybrid. But still no movement. So he had the idea that maybe a door wasn't completely closed, so we got out together and opened and closed all the doors and the trunk, got back inside, his head back in my car, got the key, seatbelt, foot on the brake, push the button, and voila, the car moved. When he stood up, I shook his hand, thanked him very much, and we went on our way.

But something had been absent in that human transaction. The missing element was one of the most basic of human experiences — the feeling of curiosity. Why wasn't he curious about why I was sitting there blocking him in? He seemed to skip over that whole question and jump instead to judgment and anger. Shouldn't his first instinct be to wonder if I was okay? I could have been having a medical emergency. I might have been upset over some news that I just received. Or perhaps I was having car trouble 😊

If he had simply come to my window to check in with me, it would have been a different kind of exchange, but he made a choice not to be curious.

Now since he did rise to the occasion and engage with me in my circumstances, we ended up having something of a meaningful interaction, but I thought about it a lot afterwards.

What if we decided that our troubles were so urgent, or that we were so enamored with our own convictions, or that the world was so against us, or that there was so little hope for society's challenges — that engaging in active human curiosity felt only like an added burden? If we decided that, at best I think we would miss out on many of life's unexpected and delightful offerings. But much more tragically, I think we would leave countless opportunities to act in love on the table.

If I could, I would add to the nursery school's mantra: Listen. Be Kind. **Practice Curiosity.** Do your Best. I'd want to teach those preschoolers at their young age that curiosity will serve them, and humanity, *well* throughout their lives.

To act in love means to open our minds to other ways of thinking and being so we can listen to what someone is saying and really hear that person's values and views. And then there is a further choice. We can make the decision to hear the words, and then we can also choose to try to understand them.

This question seems to me to have a lot to do with authenticity. Do we want to have authentic interactions and learn more about ourselves, and others? Or sometimes do we feel so paralyzed by the heaviness of the world's issues that we'd rather contain and manage our human exchanges so they fit neatly into our personal rubrics for society?

To act in love means to reserve space in our hearts so that there is *always* room for the possibility of forgiveness and the potential for reconciliation. Jesus has asked us for two millennia to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. That tall order seems only to have one feasible path — love.

To act in love means that we are grateful — grateful for this planet, for the set of characteristics that makes each person unique, and for the fact that every one of us is capable of expressing and receiving love.

Dear God, help us to recognize the moments when we can act in love in support of the human family. We know that they can be anywhere. Lead us to listen, be kind, practice curiosity, and do our best. And light the way for us to live intentionally with humility, gentleness, and patience — always bearing with one another in love.

Amen.

### **Benediction**

Let us pray. God of love, hope, And renewal, thank you for being present with us this morning and for revealing again to us the many blessings of life. Stay with us, O God, as we strive to be fully alive in this human society and live gently on this planet. Help us to meet each moment with curiosity and authenticity. Open us up so that we may listen, hear, and understand. Above all, clothe us in love, and let all that we do be done in love. Amen.

*Sarah, her husband Andy, son Nick, and daughter Julia have been members of the church since 1998. Sarah taught church school classes for nine years, served on the Worship Ministry, Diaconate, and the Holy Destinations Committee, and currently serves on the Adult Faith Exploration Ministry.*