

## **Do Unto Others: Respect**

### **1 Corinthians 12:12-26**

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A few years ago, just after the inauguration of President Biden, *Business Insider* ran a story with an unusual headline - "These eleven political friendships proved party lines don't have to divide Americans". The story went on to report on eleven pairs of political figures who, despite very different political beliefs and convictions, were able to foster genuine friendships. Among the examples were Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia who held opposing opinions on dozens of court cases but shared a love of opera and spent family holidays together. Another pair is Senators John McCain and John Kerry, each of whom fought in Vietnam, but they held vastly different views about most political and social issues. However, they became friends when they joined together to pass legislation which helped veterans. Another example given is former President Bill Clinton and his friendship with both Bush presidents. While they disagreed politically through their careers, after they had all retired from political life, they became close friends - so much so that George W. Bush calls Clinton his "brother from a different mother".

Finally, stepping back in time a bit, there is the friendship between former Republican President Ronald Reagan and Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill. Though they were from different political parties with very different ideologies, the two were willing to find common ground and shared mutual respect. Tip O'Neill's son wrote in the *New York Times*, "While neither man embraced the other's worldview, each respected the other's right to hold it. Each respected the other as a man."

These sorts of bipartisan friendships are hard to imagine in these days when politics has become so polarized. Yet, as we Christ-followers seek to model a peaceful path forward, I think there are some lessons we can learn from them - particularly about respect. This is the third in our "Do Unto Others" sermon series as we participate in the nationwide "campaign for kindness" in these weeks before the election. Together, we have been exploring what it means to do unto others as we would want them to do to us through themes of kindness, humility, and today, respect.

As is so often true, we gain some insight into the meaning of respect when we look at the word's roots. The word "respect" comes from the Latin *respectus* which means "the act of looking at one often, to consider, to observe". So, to respect someone doesn't necessarily mean we have to like their opinions or agree with them. Rather, it means trying to understand their motivations by watching what they say and do, listening to them, and recognizing their gifts .

Parker Palmer is the founder of The Center for Courage and Renewal whose mission is to nurture deep integrity and relational trust, building the foundation for a more loving, equitable, and healthy world. He is also an prolific author and has spent his lifetime researching and writing about how to create healing and positive change in ourselves, our relationships, and our country. One of his most well-known quotes is "When the going gets tough, turn to wonder". In other words, when you find yourself in conflict with someone, rather than judging them or walking away, begin to ask questions. They may be questions about yourself like, "I wonder why I react

so strongly when he says things like that?” Or, they may be questions about the other person. “I wonder why he is being so aggressive? I wonder what happened to make her say things that are so triggering to me?” These are questions that lead to a deeper understanding of the dynamics which exist underneath a conflict.

Rev. Ben Henley writes, “It can be so easy to misunderstand when we interpret what someone says or does through the lens of our story, rather than being curious about the lens they carry from their story.” This kind of sacred curiosity invites us to consider that everyone enters every communication and relationship with a story of their own - a story of losses, successes, brokenness, and hope. Their story shapes their behavior and beliefs. If we approach them with respect, observe and listen, we may come to see them as individual humans rather than simply one of “them”.

The reality is that these days we may not be able to find common ground politically or socially - especially with those whose views are the polar opposite of our own. However, we may be able to connect around our shared humanity. We all have family, friends, or other loved ones. We all have loved, been hurt, been proud, been ashamed. We all have places in this world that are comforting or beautiful for us. We all have sights, smells, and sounds which repel or delight us. We all have burdens and responsibilities. And we all have some gift from God that we can offer for the greater good.

This is what the apostle Paul reminds us of in his letter to the Corinthians. Oh, the Corinthians! Paul started the church in Corinth but then moved on to preaching and teaching in other places. After he left, the new Corinthian Christians began to fight with each other. Their church was soon filled with schisms and divisions. They fought over socioeconomic status and who should take Communion when, where, and how. And they fought over who had the most important spiritual gifts to offer the community.

So, Paul wrote to them using this wonderful metaphor of the body. There are many different parts to a body - hands, face, feet, legs, and so on - but they all are part of the same body. Each part has its job to do, and every job is important. Generally, the different parts don't substitute for each other very well. For example, your feet hold you up and propel you forward. You may be able to walk on your hands for a few seconds, but if you really want to move, you walk on your feet.

Similarly, in the Corinthian church, each person has God-given skills and gifts to contribute to the common good. Some people preach, others teach. Some handle the finances, others are prayer warriors. Some prepare food, others repair buildings. The community is not whole without the gift each person brings.

So, what if we think of all of humanity as like the church in Corinth? What if we apply this body metaphor to us, to our family and friends, to our enemies and rivals, to people who look different from us or speak a different language? What if all of us put together make one body, and we need the gifts of every individual to stay whole and healthy. Can we trust that in God's creation every person has some gift, skill, ability, strength that the rest of us need? That in God's creation, the things that divide us are secondary to what unites us?

If we start there, then we return to respect. When we encounter someone with whom we disagree, we stop and we observe them, early and often. We watch for what their gift is. We look for what it is they do or say or believe that has value for all of us. Maybe that conservative crackpot is also researching a cure for Alzheimer's. Maybe the liberal looney has also volunteered at the VA. Maybe the unhoused guy on the street can sing so beautifully it melts your heart or the motorcycle dude with the tattoos is a doctor who returns each year to Africa as a volunteer. Respect not only helps us to see the gifts of someone we otherwise don't like much, it also reveals our interdependence.

There is one other benefit to approaching the other parts of the body with respect and openness. When we interact with someone vastly different from ourselves, it helps us discern who we are and who we are not. Every encounter you have with someone who believes the opposite of you is an opportunity for you to clarify and articulate what you believe. So, for example, if you happen to work with someone who really believes cold, cloudy, gray days are the best kind of days, you may know immediately that you disagree with them. Your disagreement is an opening for you to consider what kind of day you think is better. Why do you think so? What is it about those days? How can you articulate what those days feel like to you?

Similarly, our disagreements help us to discern which beliefs, opinions, and choices align with God and which do not. We have the opportunity to consider how our faith informs our opinions about important issues.

So, yes, there are many good reasons to approach those who believe very differently from ourselves with respect. Yet, just because we seek to respect them, it doesn't mean that they will do the same for us. So, what do you do when you try to reach out to someone with good intentions, but they walk away? Or, worse yet, they are rude or hurtful to you.

We can return back to the gospels for that one. There comes a point in Jesus' ministry when he sends his disciples out to heal, perform miracles, and teach about love and compassion and justice. He knows that they will not always be treated well. There will be people who reject them. So, he tells them, "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet."

And so it is for us when we try to respectfully connect across differences but the other person isn't willing or doesn't listen to what we say. We don't have to stay and argue our points. We don't have to accept mistreatment or cruelty. We simply walk away and shake the dust off our feet. We leave behind the ill will of others and move on.

As we draw closer to the election and whatever lies beyond it, may we be people who approach those who are different from ourselves with curiosity and respect. It may not make a difference. But maybe, just maybe, our willingness to listen, to observe, to seek out the gifts of the other will one day open the door to healthier dialogue. Maybe, at some point, we will meet someone with whom we profoundly disagree but we find a shared passion like opera or a shared cause like care of veterans. Maybe the day will come when we can speak of the other as a sister or brother of another mother.

May it be so. Amen.