

A Spirit of Civility **Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 5:16-26**

It's been said that fiction is merely a mirror of reality, which may explain why the current number one movie around the world is *Captain America: Civil War*. I haven't seen it, though it wouldn't surprise me if the popular opinion outside of this country (at least apart from Avenger fans) is that this is a documentary on our current Presidential campaigns! Right about now, a lot of Americans are convinced we could use a few superheroes to step up and intervene before the general tone of this country gets anymore bellicose and lawless. However, the superheroes we need wouldn't be the type to bully their opponents into submission. Instead, they would show us how to behave, i.e., how to be civil, respectful, and decent to each other. Those are the superheroes who could save our country.

As you've probably noticed, civility is a real problem in American society. This isn't a new concern, to be sure, but it certainly has become a major one at present. We see rude and hostile behavior everywhere—in politics, in the media, in schools, in the workplace, in public and private settings. Pier Forni, founder of the Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, describes it in this way:

In today's America, incivility is on prominent display: in the schools, where bullying is pervasive; in the workplace, where an increasing number are more stressed by their coworkers than their jobs; on the roads, where road rage maims and kills; in politics, where intolerance takes the place of earnest dialogue; and on the web, where many check their inhibitions at the digital door.¹

What he observes rings true. On many fronts, the fabric of our society has been stretched to its limits and torn, the foundations of democracy have fractured and are eroding, and the character of communication and

¹Ray Williams, "The Rise of Incivility and Bullying in America," *Psychology Today*, July 15, 2012.

community itself is deeply flawed and downright disgraceful. We are evolving into a disturbingly uncivil nation.

I'm not voicing a concern most of us don't already share. We've been seeing this unfold for quite some time. Some argue that it demonstrates Plato's assertion that democracy in its later stages devolves into anarchy, then tyranny.² Others in resignation and despair merely quote Yeats' famous lines:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.³

There's also truth in the perception that our current incivility was birthed a generation or two ago in the counterculture individualism of Baby Boomers that exhibited almost a universal disdain for traditions and authority. It was symbolized in the shift of cultural icons from the Beaver Cleavers of this world to the more cynical and crude slapstick of Homer Simpson and South Park. It made headway when partisan media, opinion journalism, and talk radio became the preferred sources of news and information, instead of the wise grandfatherly digests delivered by Walter Cronkite and Paul Harvey. We've seen it gain traction on the global front when the Cold War ended and there were no significant counters to American international aggression. Incivility exploded exponentially once the internet and social media and Reality TV showcased everyone's unfiltered comments, regardless of their level of indecency or meanness.

²Andrew Sullivan, "America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny," *New York*, May 1, 2016.

³William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"

The net result is that, in a very short time, we've grown accustomed to raw candor and bullying showing up everywhere when freedom of speech has been turned into a license to harm and abuse others. It's tolerated and mimicked because intimidation works; bullies are the ones who appear to always get their way.

For years, researchers have been documenting the growing trend toward hostility and incivility throughout American society. In a more recent poll⁴ conducted earlier this year, 95% of respondents agreed that we have a civility problem in this country. Two-thirds say it's a major problem. The real issue, though, is this: 94% claim "that they themselves always or usually act politely and respectfully." It's everyone else who doesn't! Which is to say, as long as it is not owned as a personal flaw or responsibility, it is unlikely that the trends will ever significantly change throughout society.

Jim Taylor, a psychologist at the University of San Francisco, comments:

Civility is about something far more important than how people comport themselves with others. Rather, civility is an expression of fundamental understanding [and empathy] and respect for the laws, rules, and norms (written and implicit) that guide us as citizens in understanding what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. For a society to function, people must be willing to accept those structures. Though still in the distance, the loss of civility is a step toward anarchy, where anything goes; you can say or do anything, regardless of the consequences.⁵

There are days and there are situations when many people would attest it seems as if anarchy already has been unleashed in the public square.

Forni, in his writings and academic research at Johns Hopkins, says to discover or recover civility, it comes down to the "Three Rs": respect,

⁴"America Has An Incivility Problem," posted on LinkedIn, 1 February 2016.

⁵Williams, 2012.

restraint, and responsibility. I agree, that's a clear and effective way to remedy it, though I would reverse the order. In my view, people need to first recognize the problem and own some responsibility for it. Out of a sense of responsibility, people then exercise restraint in what they say or do, and how they say or do it, by acknowledging that venting anger, disgust, or cynicism isn't always warranted or justified, or sensitive to how it will be viewed or received. Every word that proceeds from our almighty lips isn't helpful or harmless. Social discourse is more effective when people enlist filters or restraints, be they internal or external, so that the words they utter won't be words they'll later have to eat.

Once responsibility and restraint are in good working order, then respect is much easier to cultivate or earn. We respect others (and they, in turn, respect us) by our listening to them, not attacking them. Discourse begins with understanding the other side's point of view.

The "Three Rs" are easy to get. But at the same time, it's obvious restraint and respect don't sell airtime on the radio, or gain followers on cable TV, or fill the comments sections in print or online. But it seems the fundamentals of civility have to become more important to us as a society if we hope to have any meaningful and measureable sense of the common good. What we're experiencing may, indeed, illustrate the social instability of late-stage democracy as Plato predicted, but at the same time, American history hasn't brought us to this time and place to merely devolve into lawlessness and civil war, especially when we still have the capacity to turn things around and remedy it.

One significant way in which we, as people of faith, might contribute to reclaiming civility is by appreciating and engaging the basic spirit of our faith. At the heart of Christianity is a spirit of civility. What might appear

to outsiders to be merely an ancient moral code we abide by is much more dynamic than that. As Christians, we interpret ethical behavior as being inspired by God's own Spirit flowing through us. The Spirit of inspiration for Jesus, we believe, is the same one which will enlighten and empower us to live in ways that bring healing and hope to a world constantly impacted by words and acts of violence.

Today, of course, is Pentecost—the day commemorating when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in Jerusalem, according to the story presented in Acts 2 (in contrast, John's Gospel conveys Jesus being the one to bestow the Spirit upon the disciples shortly after his resurrection—John 20:21-23). Since Pentecost comes across as a strange phenomenon (at least as described in Scripture), most of Christendom down through the ages has downplayed the significance of the Spirit's presence.

It's only been over the past century or so (with the rise of Pentecostalism, Holiness movement, and Charismatic Renewal) that the role of the Holy Spirit has come front and center. With that has come an emphasis on spiritual gifts and, especially, the speaking of various tongues and languages as the primary expression and evidence of the Spirit's inspiration, mimicking the record in Acts and the Pauline letters. Today, Pentecostal and Holiness congregations are thriving all over the planet, particularly in the Global South, where Christianity is growing exponentially.

However, instead of spiritually renewing the global church, this emphasis has largely divided it. Pentecostalism doesn't tend to play well in Peoria, nor would it thrive here in Noank. Nevertheless, what we don't want to overlook is that the presence of the Spirit is still centrally important and evident apart from speaking in tongues or ecstatic frenzy. Our texts

today reference other ways the Holy Spirit plays a significant role in our comprehension of faith: in a sense of spiritual intimacy with God (Romans 8) that comes through the Spirit, and through the effects of the Spirit's presence (Galatians 5), which tie directly into cultivating civility in relationships and society.

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul speaks to the personal sense of intimacy experienced with God through the Spirit—a palatable sense of oneness, not unlike what a son or daughter can experience with a parent. This is expressed through conversational prayer, where God—the otherwise unknown mysterious creative power of life and love—is invoked in a personal way, referenced here with the Hebrew familial term, *Abba*, which is what Jewish children would use to refer to their father. The intent, of course, is to demonstrate and express intimacy (not gender) meaning, there are no relational obstacles that exist between God's presence and the human spirit.

Such intimacy is important when you consider the vast array of theological, moral, linguistic, emotional, and spiritual impediments people face in trying to relate to God (at times, fostered by organized religion). Without meaningful access, it's no wonder many people have little sense of God in their lives or that congregations may appear lifeless and uninspired. On the contrary, churches are intended to be communities of the Spirit—dynamic settings where an intimacy with God is easy to access and evident in times of worship and in times of fellowship. To be able to relate to God in a comforting, informal, relational manner is an important example of the Spirit's presence in and among us.

Even more relevant to us, though, is how the Spirit of God inspires people to live graciously and respectfully when conducting their lives. Paul

makes this clear in his letter to the Galatians. After citing illustrations of incivility that are rooted in hedonism and selfishness, or motivated by anger and hatred, or resistant to correction or accountability, he then contrasts it with Spirit-inspired behavior: “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The point is, the divine Spirit is clearly evident when these kinds of characteristics are expressed routinely in people. In effect, these are the “Three Rs” of respect, restraint, and responsibility I alluded to earlier. When all is said and done, this is how we best quantify the Spirit’s presence—the fruit (or effects) of the Spirit are evident in how each of us treat others with kindness and decency, with respect and civility, seeking to heal, rather than to harm. Spirit-inspired behavior is human moral and ethical behavior at its highest level, in its most civil and uplifting character.

Historically, for theological reasons, Christendom has assumed that access to the Spirit of God is limited and unique to Christians. Those outside of the faith then cannot be directly inspired by God, which implies they cannot contribute to a truly civil society. Yet, this sort of arrogant presumption just doesn’t square with reality and, in fact, has justified a host of social injustices throughout the centuries and the inherent bigotry of Christian colonialism. Likewise, exposure to religious pluralism reveals the inaccuracy, if not fallacy, of such a belief.

For one thing, it’s not uncommon to see Christians who represent their faith in very uncivil ways—in passing harsh judgment upon others, in splitting churches and denominations over bitter disagreements, and even invoking harm upon their adversaries and enemies. At the same time, it’s not unusual to find many non-Christians who readily produce the fruit of

the Spirit as effectively as the most Spirit-inspired people we know. What this reveals is that the Spirit's influence is not a tribal blessing, granted only to certain people on the basis of their confessed religion. It has more to do with the spirit of the person in question. For example, the Dalai Lama and Gandhi may not worship Jesus, but on many fronts they have reflected the Spirit's influence and presence better than many prominent and influential Christian figures. It appears, by evidence alone, that religious conviction isn't the hallmark of the Spirit's presence—that it takes more than mere belief to bear witness of divine inspiration. Didn't Jesus teach that we will know a good tree by its fruit—that actions speak louder than words?

In my view, humility and grace are the critical and essential elements of being Spirit-inspired, and humility and grace are often found in people the world over. Evidence of the Spirit's presence is determined more by the spirit of a person reflecting the characteristics and qualities of the Spirit of God, than by any religious confession they make.

For that reason, I'm not totally disheartened by the state of our society or its future. I expect it to turn around, since a spirit of civility is what each society needs—anarchy and tyranny are socially cannibalistic and self-destructive. I sense many American Christians will learn lessons about civility from those they are inclined to target as religious rivals and enemies. I believe a whole generation—perhaps even the Millennials—inspired by faith or by the conditions of society will purposefully aim to bring humanity to a better place—away from social anarchy we're trending toward, in favor of a more cooperative, more just, more compassionate, more generous, one more genteel and gracious public character than we presently find. The Spirit of God, I believe, is behind it and inspiring it, even in the present, in a redemptive effort to heal humanity of our ills.

Why shouldn't God want it to be this way? What's the merciful and redemptive value to incivility, especially if Christians are contributing to it? For the Spirit of God is a spirit of civility and decency, a spirit of kindness and gentleness, a spirit of compassion and mercy, a spirit of hope and healing in the face of all the meanness and malice that harms so much of what God created as good.

Will you and I live long enough to see it, i.e., a more civil society? I expect so, because many of us will embrace a Spirit-inspired life. We already devote ourselves to being open to God and cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our own spirits. We will take responsibility for our words and actions, we will employ restraints on what we say and what we do, and we will show respect and live into a spirit of civility. The more people who are conscientious, decent, and civil, of any age or social location or religious persuasion, will make it possible for the rest of the world to embrace it as a better way to be.

If we want this to be our world—a world with a spirit of civility—then let's be serious about it. Make it a personal cause to plant the spiritual seeds that will grow and bear the good fruit of God within us and in our communities, schools, workplaces, and country. By doing so, we will manifest in the 21st century the spiritual power, presence, and possibilities that God envisioned and promised the world at Pentecost.

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