

I. Introduction

A. Today I want to say something about the choices in front of us, about how we respond in the face of trouble and violence and racism and social decay.

B. This is the third message I wrote on this topic. I picked the topic 6 months ago with a view of framing my remarks around the toxic culture as evidenced in this election cycle. All the anger and banter.

1. This is the fourth presidential cycle since I have been senior pastor. During the summer before the previous three I had done a few weeks on politics. Not partisan. Instead:

a) Looking to Romans 13 for an understanding of God's view of government.

b) Looking to Exodus 20 and the implicit warning against allowing government to become an idol – looking to it for the kinds of security we should reserve for God.

c) I've tried to explain how we are to think about the divergent claims about our origin as a country – some saying we are a Christian nation and others saying we are not.

d) One year I explored how Jesus might vote.

2. I'm not sure whether those messages were helpful or not.

a) I had Republicans mad at me because they thought I was a Democrat and Democrats mad at me because they thought I was a Republican. Although most people just assumed that my views mirrored theirs, whatever their views were. After all, how could they not? It's all so clear.

3. But I was going to start by assuring everyone that I was not going to talk about him or her, but I was going to talk about how we talk about the whole thing and what it looks like to be civil in the midst of culture that is losing its civility.

4. Talk about how to disagree without being disagreeable.¹ With some comments about the ongoing violence in Chicago.

C. I finished that message early in the week, before the killings of Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota.

D. And so it felt like to note comment on those events would be wrong so I adjusted things. That was Thursday night.

E. Then I woke up Friday morning to news that five police officers had been killed at a Black Lives Matter rally. And I thought what I had prepared still held, but yesterday morning I read it and decided it needed a major rewrite.

1. We are losing our civility.

a) The term comes from the Latin *civitas* and means the rules that help us get along in public. Aristotle was convinced that we were not truly human until we knew how to function as citizens in a city.²

b) In *The Case for Civility*, Os Guinness defines it as a classical republican (small “r”) and democratic (small “d”) virtue, noting that the greater the diversity in society the greater the need to learn how to be civil.

2. Let me be clear, civility does not mean being nice. It’s not about saying “please and thank you,” although that doesn’t hurt. It’s not about going along to get along. Jesus was kind and gracious but he also overturned tables in the temple and called the Pharisees “white washed tombs.”

a) If your view of Jesus is that He was a nice man with kind eyes who walked around with a baby lamb smiling a lot and telling people to use their inside voice then you haven’t read the Gospels.

b) I’ll remind you, that is not the kind of person the Roman Empire would put to death for insurrection.

3. Civility does not simply mean being kind.

a) But it does mean we learn how to get along with others and how to disagree in ways that move things forward.

F. Clearly, we need to raise our game here. We are sliding in the wrong direction.

G. This election cycle has scared me because it has surprised me.

1. I knew how big the gap is between the left and right. And, after lots of discussions over twenty years with men and women of color – and lots of reading and listening – I feel like I have a growing understanding of the racial challenges we still face.

2. Mostly what I know is that as a rich, white male, I don’t see it because there are systematic injustices that do not effect me.

3. I went into this election aware of those challenges. But I did not understand how large the gap had grown between the haves and have-nots.³

4. I do not know many who think that building a wall along the Mexican border seems like a good idea.

H. The shootings that happened on Thursday night got my attention because:

1. When I worked as management consultant I helped restructure a police department – that led me to spend a fair bit of time with officers and ride on patrol and see things from their perspective. It's not a job I would ever want. And in recent years it has gotten harder.

2. And twenty years ago a kid I grew up with, who had become a Dallas police officer, was jumped by a mentally ill person while stopped at an accident. He was alone. This guy got his gun and then – reportedly to the encouragement of the mostly African American crowd – was shot and killed. He was 25 at the time, married six months.

3. So, crimes with police in Dallas remind me of John.

I. I have found myself angry lately. When I have tried to figure out why – when I remind myself that anger is a secondary emotion and I need to figure out what is behind it – I've decided that it's fear. I have come to believe that society is more fragile than I thought it was.

J. Keats famously wrote a poem wondering if the center could hold.

1. Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

2. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

3. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

4. The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

5. The best lack all conviction, while the worst

6. Are full of passionate intensity.

K. Martin Marty once noted that at the moment the “people who are good at being civil often lack strong convictions and people who lack strong convictions often lack civility.”⁴ What we need is a convicted civility.

L. Today I do not have solutions to policy issues as much as I have a reminder of how we are to live in a broken world. I have relatively modest goals today. I want to restore hope. And I want to remind you of how those of us who look to Jesus are expected to navigate the challenges in front of us.

II. Before we turn to I Peter 3, let me frame my comments briefly.

A. It is worth noting that many things are getting better. Not for everyone in every way, but if you step back and look at the world and our country over the last 100 years, we are taking ground.

1. For that matter, the US is more stable than just about anywhere on the planet. And the political and cultural challenges in front of us are certainly smaller than Jesus was navigating.

B. Let me note that there is room for disagreement on the best way to help the under-resourced.

1. Many argue that bigger government and social programs are needed. Others say they are not helpful.

2. The fact is, we can walk hand-in-hand with someone without seeing eye-to-eye.

C. There is a great opportunity here for the church to step up.

1. Not just another special interest group lobbying for what we want. We have to be more than that – bigger than that.

2. We need to work for the common good, the welfare of the city – for Shalom. This robust peace – not just a lack of violence or war, but positive good.

3. We have spiritual problems in our country and they need spiritual solutions. We need to step into the gap.

4. Revival is a much preferred option to hiring more police.

D. We need to make peace with the fact that we live in an increasingly pluralistic society.⁵

1. As compared to a generation ago, the United States is more economically diverse, religiously diverse and more ethnically diverse than before.

a) Globalization has torn down the tall walls that used to keep us apart and as a result we are exposed to a greater diversity of views.

b) A friend of mine who lives outside of Chicago recently said that the children at his daughters' elementary school speak 35 languages. Neither of us could name 35 languages.

2. There is more political diversity. And this makes us uncomfortable. Life is easier when we are surrounded by people who speak, think, look, vote and act like we do. This just means we have to be more thoughtful.

- E. And in a pluralistic society the church has three options:
1. The Benedict Option
 - a) Withdraw, let society crash, be ready to step in and pick up the pieces.
 - (1) This is what the Essenes were doing back during Jesus time. This is what the monks did during the Dark Ages. This is being advocated today by Rod Dreher.
 - b) I do not think this is what we are called to do.
 - c) I think we have been called to be salt and light.⁶
 2. The Culture War option
 - a) This is, win at the ballot box. Get our judges in place so they can enforce our laws and things go our way.
 - b) There is much to be said for just laws. And much to be said for Christians being rigorously involved in politics. But we cannot legislate life-change. That is the Holy Spirit's job. And we cannot bring in the Kingdom of God this way. It hasn't worked in the past and we don't have the votes for this to work in the future.
 3. The Wilberforce Option
 - a) William Wilberforce, British parliamentarian who was led to faith as a young man and then disciplined by John Newton, the former slave trader who wrote *Amazing Grace*.
 - b) Wilberforce spent his life trying to secure the freedom of the slaves. He profoundly influenced Lincoln.
 - c) And he also worked for civility. This was his second life goal.
 - d) At various times Wilberforce was one of the most hated men in all of England. His efforts to abolish slavery were defeated over and over and over again year after year and decade after decade. On two occasions he was physically beaten for his views.
 - e) But he replied in love and grace and kept on.
 - f) It was complicated and hard work – which required a lot of long discussions with other Christians and with other politicians, but he eventually persuaded others.

III. So what are we supposed to do?

- A. We turn to I Peter 3:8.
- B. There are lots of passages I considered:
1. In Galatians 5 Paul advocates for the Fruit of the Spirit; in Romans 12 he tells us that, “as far as is possible, live at peace with all people;” in Titus we are told to avoid quarrelling and to be gentle and to show every courtesy to everyone.
 2. In Heb. 12 the writer says something of the same thing: “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.
- C. But let’s go to I Peter. He was writing from Rome and writing to Christ followers all over the Empire who were suffering religious persecution and expecting more on the way. This is what he says. I’m reading from *The Message*:
1. Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that’s your job, to bless. You’ll be a blessing and also get a blessing.
 2. Whoever wants to embrace life and see the day fill up with good,
 3. Here’s what you do: Say nothing evil or hurtful; Snub evil and cultivate good; run after peace for all you’re worth.
 4. God looks on all this with approval, listening and responding well to what he’s asked; But he turns his back on those who do evil things.
 5. If with heart and soul you’re doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you’re still better off. Don’t give the opposition a second thought. Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy. Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They’ll end up realizing that they’re the ones who need a bath. It’s better to suffer for doing good, if that’s what God wants, than to be punished for doing bad. That’s what Christ did definitively: suffered because of others’ sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones. He went through it all—was put to death and then made alive—to bring us to God.
- D. Let me offer a few steps that I believe lead us to what some call a “convicted civility” taking some of the specifics we find in I Peter.

IV. Our response needs to be shaped and informed by several things:

- A. Love.

1. Christianity 101 calls on us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We need to love.
 2. Please note, the prevailing attribute today is tolerance, which used to mean being kind to those you disagree with. It now means you agree with those you disagree with. The PC police now require what they consider to be right thinking not just right actions. They can be very intolerant with their views about being tolerant.
 3. But we are called to go beyond that. We are not expected to be tolerant. We are expected to love our enemies.
 4. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said: Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.
- B. We are to respond in hope.
1. I have found myself telling people to “Relax.” If you are in Christ then you do not need to be so anxious. God is in control. Always. This ends well. Jesus wins. His kingdom will prevail. A loving, just, grace-filled society will one day be established. Your ultimate wellbeing does not depend on who occupies the White House.
- C. We need to respond in humility
1. One of the roots of civility is humility. David Brooks had an interesting column about this five years ago in the *New York Times*. He argued that our best efforts are flawed but we can depend on others to make them better. We should assume that in dialogue with others ideas, projects, books, columns, legislation gets better.⁷
 2. How do we get along? We assume that we do not know perfectly. It is hard for us to see ourselves clearly. It is very easy for us to have a crusader mentality, which says: I am right and God is on my side.
 3. We need to be very aware of our own sinfulness.
 4. Psalm 139 is a great place to turn for this. The first 18 verses have this wonderful recitation of God’s majesty and power.
 5. Then the Psalmist seems to slip into a Crusader mentality just a bit and he says:
 - a) If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!
 - b) They speak of you with evil intent, your adversaries misuse your name.

c) Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

d) I have nothing but hatred for them, I count them my enemies.

6. And then, almost as if he sees what is going on, he pulls out of it and says – v. 23:

a) Search me, God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts.

b) See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

D. We care for the oppressed.⁸

1. As I already noted, there are principled disagreements between the left and the right on how best to help the poor. You have your opinion. It's likely worth listening to the other side. (Not a caricature of the other side, but the other side).

2. And to be part of the solution. If you do not believe government should be part of the solution, then step up.

a) We have a Jobs Initiative in North Chicago where seasoned business people are mentoring aspiring entrepreneurs, helping them grow their businesses, secure access to capital, employ more people.

b) We have opportunities to tutor in public schools through North Chicago Community Partners or Reading Power

c) There are opportunities to volunteer at the Changing Closet or ?????

3. If you feel like government is not the solution, then be the solution.

4. I read some Christians advocating uncivil behavior because of the cosmic urgency. They argue that the prophets could be brutal in their assessment of people.

5. Yes, but Jesus could be brutal. But he told the truth and he was generally fighting for the weak against the powerful.

E. We need to work to secure an open public square.

1. Right now the two views that are loudest on the world stage.

a) The first are those advocating religious extremism (most notably for radical Islam).⁹

- b) The second are those advocating secular exclusivism – which claims that religion has no place in public life. (Think the ACLU).
- 2. Some have labeled this the “sacred public square” versus “naked public square.”
- 3. Both sides have money and lawyers and are locked in something akin to WWI trench warfare.
- 4. What we are after is a civil public square.
 - a) Where nearly all views are welcome but people cannot force their views on others.¹⁰
 - b) Where people of every faith – Christian, Jew, atheist, Muslim, Mormon and others - are free to engage in public life on the basis of their faith with freedom of conscience. We must create a framework that is fair for all.
 - c) This was the American ideal. It is our best hope.
- 5. Let me be clear, this does not mean we say ever view is right. Saying that everyone has a right to believe what they want to believe is not the same as saying every view is right.
- 6. This is different than the home court advantage the church had in this country for years. But it is far more than the early church had and they thrived.
- 7. We do not need an advantage from the government. We just need civility.
- 8. And everyone wins when civility breaks out.

V. This is not easy. This week, while working on a sermon on civility, I got sideways with two people. And it took a fair bit of time. And I was pretty sure I was right. And pretty sure I could win.

- A. But it meant escalating the conflict. And I was ready to do that.
- B. But in talking to a friend he said, “hmm, that idea doesn’t sound like it’s coming from a good place.” Swallow your pride and move on.
- C. We can do this. Things are fragile, perhaps more fragile than before. But that is an opportunity for love to shine more brightly.

VI. CAMPUS PASTORS / Announcements and wrap up.

- A. We are to be salt and light, loving, gracious, informed peace-makers, full of hope and courage. Participate. But at all times be civil. And be loving. And if you need an example of this let me recommend some things:
- B. On the topic of race and racism, the book that helped me see things most clearly is *Divided by Faith* by Michael Emerson
- C. Read about William Wilberforce – or watch *Amazing Grace*
- D. Read Metaxes biography of Bonhoeffer
- E. Or read *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom, who risked her life to protect Jews but was kind and gentle to her enemies – respected their humanity – even as she worked to stop their evil plans.
- F. Or look to Jesus. Who was kind to us while we were yet sinners.

¹ Blame talk radio or the Internet or government or something else. The fact is, our society is more divided and that the distances between views are greater and that people hold those views with more zeal than in the recent past. Some say this isn't true. They argue the distances between views are not widening, we are just yelling louder. Perhaps. Whatever the case, several things have led to this – perhaps the largest is that: there is a growing number of Americans who are hurt, scared or frustrated. Like many, I predicted that Donald Trump's candidacy would flame out early. After all, it didn't resonate with my experience. The big shock for me in this election cycle was that I was as out of touch with the American people as apparently I was.

² In his helpful book, *Uncommon Decency*, Richard Mouw defines civility and as “public politeness.” And describes it as “tact, moderation, refinement and good manners toward people who are different from us.” Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency; Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), p. 12.

³ Charles Murray has written about this in his book, *Coming Apart*.

⁴ Robert Putnam noted that we are increasingly concentrating at opposite ends of the spectrum – the highly religious at one end and the avowedly secular at the other. Putnam and Campbell found that 70 percent of those who never say grace before meals identify as Democrats, while slightly more than 20 percent who never say grace identify as Republicans. Meanwhile, among those who say grace daily, 40 percent identify as Democrats and 50 percent identify as Republicans. The same pattern holds for self-reported religiosity. The more religious you say you are, the more likely you are to say you're a Republican. Conversely, the less religious you say you are, the more likely you are to mark yourself down as a Democrat. R.R. Reno, “Faith and Responsibility, *First Things*, Feb. 2011.

⁵ In *First Things*, “Faith and Responsibility” by R.R. Reno (Feb. 2011), Reno writes: Ah, America. Where else in the postmodern West can you find snake-handling preachers; earnest middle-aged women at Unitarian churches who talk about astrology; bookstores full of novels about the rapture; entire seminaries given over to dispensational scholasticism; men with long beards, fur hats, and yarmulkes; priests in cassocks; camp meetings; church suppers with cabbage and lime Jell-O salads; stolid Presbyterians, sweet Methodists, fire-breathing Baptists, and homeschooling Catholics; liberal Jesuits; Jewish Buddhists, Black Muslims, and more” all mixed together in the urban centers, suburban sprawl, and endless rural emptiness of our continent-spanning country?

⁶ Martin Luther wrote against this as well. He said: “The Kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among

friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared?

⁷ David Brooks, “Tree of Failure,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2011.

⁸ One of the steps forward that I cut from my sermon is that we need to respect the humanity of our opponents – i.e., we cannot argue for human dignity while destroying theirs. In the 19th century, Charles Hodge, a Reformed Theologian and a fierce critic of theological liberalism, found the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher so wrong and distasteful that he wrote 15 pages rigorously critiquing it. Yet in a footnote at the end he noted that it was Schleiermacher’s personal practice to gather his children around the family piano after dinner to sing praises “to the Lord Jesus.” Hodge said he was confident that Schleiermacher, who had recently passed away, was “now singing praises to the Lord Jesus face to face.” We need to learn from his example of attacking ideas without unnecessarily maligning people. (John Buchanan, “Editor’s Desk,” *The Christian Century*, Nov. 13, 2013. This doesn’t mean we have to be nice. Politics is a contact sport. There is room for punishing blocks and bone-crushing tackles but not cheap shots. We cannot do evil and hope for good to come of it. We cannot lie or bear false witness. In an interview about civility, Os Guinness argued for the Queensberry rules for boxing. “I use the example of the Queensberry rules from boxing. [With roots in] Roman gladiatorial games, boxing was pretty brutal up until the 19th century. In 1867 the Marquis of Queensberry lent his name to regulations that put boxing in a ring, under a referee, within [a framework of] rules. For instance: Touch gloves to begin and don’t punch below the belt. But boxing is not a love-in. Boxers fight until one loses.” (“Os Guinness: Civility in the public square,” *Faith and Leadership*, Nov. 1, 2009).

⁹ Radical Islam is making the loudest – and most disruptive push for this, though there is a militant Hinduism gaining traction in India and Christians have been willing to force their views if they get a chance.

¹⁰ There are views that are not welcome. These are tough calls. Our courts have said that adult Jehovah’s Witnesses can refuse blood transfusions and die, but they cannot force these views on their children.