

Pentecost 7 2018

Do you remember the first forms of politeness your parents taught you? In our home they were: Say please. Say thank you. Don't tease your little sister. Don't hit your big brother. Share your toys. And, whenever you go to someone else's house, say 'thank you for having me' as you leave. Even if you hated the bony fish they gave you for dinner. Even if their child was mean to you, their cat scratched you and their dog growled at you. Whatever. Still say 'thank you for having me' before bolting for the safety of home.

Jesus' instructions to his disciples as he sends them out to other people's houses sound a little less civil. Far from saying 'thank you for having me' they are to shake the dust from their feet when they leave houses that have made them feel unwelcome. They are not to offer a pretence of gratitude just to be polite. The work they have to do – casting out unclean spirits, calling people to repent – to change their ways of being with each other – is too important to be hindered by good manners.

Which brings us to where we're at today in our own civic life as we try to work out how far civility should stretch. Is it ever ok to be less than polite with one another? Does our call to love always include a call to respect the person, or the office, to be nice, to be meek? I'm asking these questions not because I have a pre-packaged answer to put before you today but because I'm wrestling with them myself. I want to make sure that my faith is part of any answer I come up with. That, as Grace Cathedral, our faith is part of the answer we come up with.

It's interesting that these first disciples are being sent out right after an encounter in which Jesus faces rejection. His hometown refuses to see him as more than the craftsman they have known him to be – his hands are supposed to be shaping wood not healing people. And Jesus' reaction is twofold. He doesn't stay to argue with them but neither does he accept their judgment. He walks away and focuses his mission on the villages outside. He is amazed at their unbelief so sure he is of who he is and what he is called to do.

There are some things I am also sure about in who we are and what we are called to do. I am sure that we are called to cast out the unclean spirits of racism, misogyny, trans and homophobia, white privilege, Islamophobia, antisemitism – all those forms of hate and fear that oppress God's children. I am sure that we are to call the powerful to repent and change their ways whenever we see them acting out of these forms of hate and fear. I am sure we are to protect the little ones, the orphans, the weak and the vulnerable. I don't think there is anything in life I feel surer about than this.

But how do we do this? How do we do this without creating deeper divisions? Without forgetting that every human being, even those whose opinions we loathe, is a beloved child of God? How do we do this and remain kind, remain nice? Where in all this does civility help and where in all this does civility hinder?

For remember that civility is not the same for all people, and nor are we all held to the same standards of civility. For Canadian First Nations, for example, civility includes letting elders speak as long as they feel moved to rather than respecting the time limit set for a meeting. The western need to 'keep to time' feels to them like extreme rudeness. Telling someone to 'be civil' can be a way of telling them to stick to the white male middle-class norms – not to laugh too loudly, not to express valid anger at unjust treatment, not to call out the privileged elite, not to rock the boat or upset the apple-cart.

But sometimes the boat needs rocking and the apple-cart needs to be upset. Remember when wondering what would Jesus do that flipping tables and chasing people with a whip is one of the options! Being Christian doesn't always mean being nice. While the world, and our own nation, remains a place where refugee children can be caged away from their parents and the needs of the poor ignored by the greed of the powerful then nice doesn't cut it as a form of opposition. Telling the truth to power is a higher Christian virtue than being sweet and polite.

But while we may not be called to be nice we can't duck the fact that we are called to be loving. That one of the most radical, and difficult, of Jesus' teachings is that we should love our enemies as well as our neighbours. Unlike private citizens and business owners, the Church must never shut its doors to those we consider egregious sinners or refuse to share its table with those whose actions we despise. We are always called to teach repentance, always called to believe that forgiveness and change are possible for anyone – remembering how much we need them ourselves.

So how can we chase out the unclean spirits of racism and nationalism and all the other 'isms' that keep oppressed people oppressed while still holding out the hand of love. We can't do this (hands pushing away) to any child of God. But we can't do this (hands open in acceptance) to any teaching or practice that harms other children of God. So we have to do this (one hand open, one pushing back). A complete no to any ideology or practice that oppresses others. A complete yes to the humanity of the person oppressing. But, when I'm weary with marching and heart-broken over crying children, this (hands pushing away) would be so, so much easier!

So, as a Church, here are ways we will be civil and we will be loving. We will remain open to all people, whatever their political persuasions and ideological attitudes. We will listen to hear the ways in which God lives in them, knowing that they are God's beloved just as we are. We will look for the light in them not just focus on the dark, and we will remember the darkness that inhabits our own hearts too. And we will accept that this is sometimes hard but that this is always essential to our faith.

And, as a Church, here are ways we will be prophetic and we will be loving. We will be a voice for those who have been silenced by detention or by any form of oppression. We will listen to God's call for justice and we will put that justice ahead of our own self-interest and our own comfort. We will put our obedience to God before our obedience to any earthly authority, never resorting to violence but never being afraid to stand for the right. And we will accept that this is sometimes hard but that this is always essential to our faith.

Jesus sends us out today as he sent the 12 so many years ago. He sends us out together so that we can support and encourage one another. He sends us out with no signs of privilege and no promise of being welcomed. He sends us out to cast out demons and to call for people's hearts to change. He sends us out to be God's presence in the world; to say an endless 'yes' to all her beloved people and an endless 'no' to all evil and oppression. Let us say yes to being sent!