

The Way We Behave

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5. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe. —from “Eight Points of Progressive Christianity”

Let all things be done for building up. —1 Corinthians 14:26

*If you don't have something good to say about somebody, don't say it at all.
—Thumper in the movie, Bambi*

Reading: Matthew 18:15-18

Today I continue our series of sermons on “What is Progressive Christianity?” My hope is that through these sermons we can begin a congregational discussion about what we mean when we say that we are a progressive Christian congregation. I do not pretend to answer this question but rather ask the questions and start a dialogue.

And, as I have said before, I hope that this dialogue is *honest, open and respectful*. Let us disagree but with *kindness*. We've provided opportunities for people to join in, and I hope that many more will participate.

So we come to the fifth point of the “Eight Points of Progressive Christianity”: (See above.)

Now the most obvious passage that came to my mind was from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” (Matthew 7:1) And what he was saying was not that we don't evaluate, examine and challenge behavior both within the community and the world. We still make ethical decisions. But the word “judge,” *krino* in the Greek, is more like “to pass judgment,” “to pass sentence” or “to condemn.” So it is more like “Do not condemn or you will be condemned.”

Now this is very close to the meaning of that famous story told by John about the woman caught in adultery, when John's Jesus says, “Let those without sin cast the first stone.” One by one the people drop their stones and leave. Then Jesus says, according to John, “neither do I *condemn* you.” (John 8:1ff)

Much of Jesus' ministry was countering people who thought they knew the Truth and who were going to be enforcers of the Truth, those who thought they were “without sin” and had perfect understanding, which gave them the right to stone others and condemn others and pass judgment upon others, including, sadly, even Jesus, himself.

How do we stone people in the church today? How do we condemn and pass judgment on them? Well, we kick them out. We say that they are un-Christian, that they are not saved. We tell them to be quiet, shut up, to hide.

I remember a number of years ago a couple who joined my church who were vegans. And as it turned out they were very zealous, militant and evangelical vegans. They told me that

they would not rest until the entire congregation became vegans, too. This was not a healthy situation, and I had to make it clear that the church welcomed and accepted everyone—vegan and non-vegan, alike. And I eventually had to speak with them when they started telling the congregation at every opportunity they had that eating meat was to participate in a holocaust. And it's not a good thing church to have some members accusing other members of being murderers. "Do not condemn; do not throw stones," said Jesus.

Somebody gave me a magnet that I have on our refrigerator at home: "Believe those who seek the truth. Doubt those who find it."

Just about every religious tradition has a group that has "found the Truth," who lack a vital humility. And so they seek to purify their church or mosque or synagogue by driving out the others. There is a kind of militancy that this Truth will win and conquer all the other viewpoints out there—not just in the faith community but in the country and in the world. As William Sloane Coffin said, "Intolerance in theology leads to intolerance in behavior."

Now when I say that Jesus is the "Son of God," what I mean is that for me Jesus was a window to divinity. When I look at Jesus I see God. It was not just what Jesus said, but *how he behaved*. There was a consistency between his gentle ways and his message of a loving God.

Robert Fulgum in his classic book, *All I Ever Really Needed to Know*, said that what we really need to know is not really to be found in universities or the great institutions of higher learning, or with corporate think-tanks, or with governmental bureaucrats. All we need to know was taught to us in kindergarten as children.

*Share everything.
Play fair.
Don't hit people.
Put things back where you found them.
Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
Wash your hands before you eat.
Flush.
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
Live a balanced life—learn to think some
and draw and paint and sing and dance
and play and work every day some.
Take a nap every afternoon.
When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic,
hold hands, and stick together.
Be aware of wonder.*

All we really need to know is both simple and mysterious. And so it is with the church.

Remember the movie, *Bambi*? Thumper's mother teaches him, "If you can't say anything good about anybody, don't say it at all."

Throughout the years, the church has argued and fought over some noble and some not so noble causes.

This has disappointed many people, and there are those who have even left the church disillusioned with all the fighting and carrying on.

That there is conflict in the church may disappoint us, but it certainly should not surprise us. The church, after all, is a human institution and is subject to the same weaknesses and shortcomings as any other human community.

Jesus preached to his community of followers as people who would have strong differences, as people who would constantly have to forgive each other. Not seven times but “seventy time seven times.” The question for Jesus was not *if* the community would experience conflict within itself and with the world. But the question was for him *how would it deal with its conflict and anger*. Paul would later write to one of these communities: “Go ahead and be angry, but do not sin.” (Eph. 4:26) Jesus did not expect those who followed him to be inhuman or above the fray. But Jesus did hold up a standard for how to deal with feelings of anger and with conflict.

So the church is far from perfect, but there is something about the community of faith which can be (and sometimes is) a model to the rest of the world of how to deal with conflict. It is not a group which professes to be without sin or without anger or without fighting. But the congregation demonstrates by example how to reconcile division and resolve disputes. The church can provide glimmers and rays of light in a world sometimes enveloped by darkness.

And as Christians, as people of faith, sometimes *how we say things*, sometimes *how we take a stand*, is more important than *what we say* or *what stand we take*. Sometimes our most effective witness to the world around us is how we behave, how we treat each other, and the process of making decisions rather than the decisions themselves. Bill Coffin has a great line: “I’m very much in favor of doctrine, but doctrines are signposts; love is the hitching post.”

Today we have some basic principles about how followers of Jesus are to deal with differences among themselves. These principles were passed on to us from Matthew. He listed three steps for dealing with any kind of complaint against another person.

First, one is to go immediately, directly and personally to the individual with whom one has a difference. We are not to hide, ignore or cover up our differences.

Notice that the victim who feels wronged is to take the initiative. There is no room in this teaching for sitting around, licking wounds and sighing, “Poor me!” One cannot always avoid being a victim, but one can avoid the victim mentality.

In the church we are responsible for up building one another as a church, and the concern is upon the spiritual well-being of the other. Notice a few things about how to initially deal with someone who has hurt us.

- 1.) It is done in private. “If another member sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”

2.) The expression “win back” shows that what matters is the other. “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.”

3.) The feelings are not either kept to oneself where they are stored up and fester, or they are not told to anyone else. I am responsible for my own anger, whenever I have it. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger,” Paul would write. (Eph. 4:26)

The goal is love, forgiveness and reconciliation; and that is what the followers of Jesus are about.

About 25 years ago I met with one of the ministers of a large, conservative church in Cincinnati because I admired how they handled conflict in their church. He wrote:

We are committed to two related concepts—that of the “clean slate” principle and the “good report” principle. The essence of these agreements is that in the event of any feeling of hurt or animosity that we might have toward one or the other members of the staff, we will take immediate action steps to share the nature of our feelings and to resolve them with the person—that is, to “clean the slate.” Asking forgiveness is often a corollary to this principle. The “good report” principle indicates that I will not give or receive a bad report on any other member of the staff. If someone else approaches me with a bad report concerning a staff colleague, (or for that matter any other member of the body) I will immediately ask the person not to proceed with their report to me and call them to go to the individual involved and share their concern. I will further hold them accountable to do so. It would be hard to overstress the importance of the two principles. (Richard Towner, College Hill Presbyterian Church)

Second, if the problem is not resolved between the two persons together, then the two should reach out to one or two other persons to work together with them to resolve their dispute. This is sort of arbitration in which a few loved and loving, respected members help to restore broken relationships.

Third, only *after* these direct, private dealings fail that the church, the corporate fellowship, is brought into play. Notice that it isn't to random individuals but to the appropriate channels. Reconciliation is the goal, and each person has responsibility in it. When at least two come together in God's name, God is in their midst. And when they gather, there are guidelines for appropriate conduct. A main rule is this: We are responsible for our own anger and for reconciling with others. We are responsible for cleaning our own slate. And as a result, Christ's body is strengthened.

Open criticism, negative gossip is never appropriate. Critical statements, allegations, accusations to the public, to people who are not in position to help change the situation, are never appropriate. It is not edifying; it is destructive and tears down; and it undermines a fair process.

Now sometimes people feel that they need to let their friends “blow off steam,” and that it is their Christian duty to “be supportive” and let them dump a load of garbage on them. But that's not being supportive, because the moment it happens, all three parties are hurt and diminished: the one being talked about, the listener who has a diminished view of that person, and the talker who has been enabled to behave in this way. And so whenever bad stories are spread or gossip is spread, *the listeners bear responsibility, too.*

We all know that truth is best served by a fair and due process. And in Jesus' words in Matthew 18, truth is the secondary issue. The primary issue is kindness. It is building up others.

By the way, being kind is not the same as being nice. Niceness refers to the surface, a superficial level of politeness. Kindness goes deeper; it a genuine concern for the other person. It is possible to be sweet and nice, yet unkind. And sometimes it's possible to be kind and not so nice—caring enough about the other person to share deep feelings or addressing areas of conflict that might appear to be impolite.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk and author, wrote,

For a community to be a real place of practice or worship, its members have to cultivate mindfulness, understanding and love. A church where people are unkind to each other or suppress each other is not a true church.

In Matthew, Jesus speaks this reality when he says, "Before you offer your gift at the altar, first be reconciled with your brother or sister." (Matthew 5:22) In other words, to truly worship we cannot "write off" each other, but we must practice kindness.

And every Sunday with the Passing of the Peace, we ritualize this. It is an exercise no in being cordial or nice but a ritual act of meeting on a profound and deep level of kindness and communion and acceptance and reconciliation.

It's not just our gift that we have to offer, but *how* we offer it that's important. I will end with a familiar story that is so appropriate:

Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Some of the younger monks had left in dissatisfaction, and no new men were joining. There were but a handful of monks and their leader, the abbot, remaining. They began fighting among themselves, each blaming the hard times on the faults and failings of the other.

One day a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery for a night's rest. He ate, and prayed alongside the other monks. The next day, as the rabbi prepared to continue on his journey, the abbot drew him aside. He told him of the problems of the monastery and asked him for his observations and for some advice to share with the other monks.

Upon hearing the abbot's woes, the rabbi was quiet for some time.

"Cannot you give me some advice to help my monastery to thrive again?" the abbot begged.

"Your monks will not listen to my advice," the rabbi replied. "But perhaps they would benefit from an observation. The Messiah dwells among you here at the monastery."

"One of us?" asked the abbot astonished. "Which one?"

“Oh, that I cannot say,” he answered. “Share this with your brothers, and in time it shall be revealed to you.”

The abbot thanked him and sent him on his way. He then gathered the monks together, who listened in amazement to the news.

“One of us! But who?” each one asked out loud. Then to themselves they wondered, “It couldn’t be Brother Robert—or could it?”

“Surely not Brother Henry, but there are times when...”

“Not the youngest, well maybe...”

“The abbot himself?”

“Could it be me?”

Soon things began to change at the monastery as each began to see the Messiah in the other and to hear the Messiah’s words in each word spoken.

Soon people began to wander back to the monastery, and in time new men joined and the monastery thrived.

Friends, the way we behave sometimes says more about us than our proclamations. Let us remember, the Messiah dwells among us here—in our very midst.