



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
5-13-12

Recently I was engaged in a conversation where I was wondering about the differences seen between two groups that ought to have a lot in common but appeared to live quite differently from each other. As I continue – you can insert here whatever two groups/organizations you wish: two rural communities, two school districts, two health care districts, two churches, two classrooms, etc. My wondering was about why one group appeared to be more stable and cohesive and the other – conflictual and divided. My friend gave the answer that one group was more homogenous and the other had more diversity within it. Is that what it takes for us to get along – homogeneity? Must we all look the same, think the same, and behave similarly? In other words – if in one group there is a greater range of social and economic levels, educational levels, ethnicities, interests–then there is less that unites them and bonds them with shared interests, so they have a hard time reaching or being in agreement on a whole variety of issues.

And I have to think deeply about that – are we cooperative and respectful only to those whom we would be friends with naturally? Must we construct a society made up of gated communities in order to have stability? Maybe in many ways we already have done that – think of ghettos and suburbs and actually developed gated communities. Does Jesus command us to love those we can be comfortable with and call friends or those He would call friends? Does He really want us to LOVE EVERYONE? And if we are to love everyone – how can we do that in day to day life? How can we openly and honestly live with differences and follow the commands of Jesus?

On Monday I was assaulted and it was not a pleasant experience. I drove to Jackson for an afternoon appointment and as I came around the corner by the Albertson's I was surrounded by protesters lining the roads, yelling, handing out materials, and standing by huge, graphic posters of unborn babies. This continued for a mile or more and then I realized I was following a pick-up truck with a huge banner asking God's Blessing to rid the world of all those they considered their enemy – and that was many of us and not limited to where we stand on abortion only. Talk about a group of people out of my comfort zone.

I was troubled and angry as I drove and parked at St. John's Episcopal Church. My emotions were churning inside of me when I walked into the main church building. The place was empty, but on tables all around me were pins and posters and brochures and flyers with these words: Civility, Compassion, and LOVE. I caught my breath when I saw them and as I wondered if I could take any of them, my soul filled with some hope and with – once again, a deep love and appreciation for the Episcopal Church.

As I later found out, their Associate Priest Mary Erickson has organized what has become a huge group of people in Jackson to make a united response to the two hate group organizations that will spend the next few weeks in Jackson with their protests and their banners and their posters.

Mary was aware of a growing current of anger and agitation bubbling up in the community as people became aware of the visiting groups intentions and she thought about what might be the best response. She asked ten community leaders to attend a meeting and 35 people showed up. Together, they agreed on a general concept of uniting the disparate voices in the town around a common cause. They wrote a mission statement: We are both pro-life and pro-choice citizens of Jackson Hole standing for civility, compassion, and love, united to protect our community and our children.

One hand-out had very practical ways to respond – starting with recognizing our anger and deciding how to use it for good. That was definitely what I needed on Monday and just seeing the hand-out and the posters helped me immensely. Then Mary shared some of her insights with me and gave me permission to tell them to you. She asked herself what message she wanted to send to her own and to other children. She wanted them to learn that the best response when confronted with hatred is love. That as a civil society there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of conducting ourselves. That it is possible to disagree with one another and still treat one another with civility, compassion, and love.

Civil discourse is described as “conversation intended to increase understanding.” Even that becomes a challenge for many of us. I often would rather ignore or avoid others different from me and continue telling my side and viewpoints only, remaining ignorant of the fullness of another’s viewpoint. That attitude willfully destroys relationship. At our recent clergy retreat The Reverend Canon Alan Jones defined sin as the perverse reluctance to connect. We avoid civil discourse. It is easy to vilify people when we don’t enter into relationship with them, when we don’t allow ourselves to know them as fellow human beings. So then, in civility we must purposely seek to know more about the people who are different from or disagreeing with us.

And when we behave civilly, then perhaps we can find compassion – compassion that they are fellow human beings with us with whom, at some deep level, we are all tied together through God’s love. I might honestly believe someone is misguided, I can wonder what has happened in their lives to fill them with such fear and hatred. I can pray for them, I can ache for them, I can realize that we all share in suffering and sinfulness. Then, I can feel compassion.

But now we come to LOVE. Throughout the entire book of John, Jesus has been repeating the message we have today – love one another as I have loved you. My command is that you love one another. You are all the branches from the same vine. I have sheep in many flocks that belong in the same fold with me. “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

That is the path that Jesus presents to us and will continue to present to us. That is the gospel message. Now we must do all we can to follow it, even if it is hard.

On this day when we honor mothers, perhaps remembering the unconditional love offered by some parents can be a guide for us. There are times when our children are frustrating, stubborn, making bad choices, breaking our hearts, and challenging us more than we want, but we hang on to love – we let love win us over. We turn to grace and patience and perseverance for answers and we keep on loving.

I know that shame, guilt, violence, fear, and hatred will never work to change lives or bring peace. I know that deeply. So, it make sense to me that with a civil tongue, a compassionate disposition – and if not a loving heart, then at least a prayerful heart, that I can continue down the path that I have before me. It is the way of a disciple.

Civility, Compassion, and LOVE.

Thanks be to God.