

## Reconciliation and Community

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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I Corinthians 3:1-9 and Matthew 5:21-37

On this, Presidents' Day weekend, we are reminded that we will elect, or re-elect, a president in 261 days. That's a lot of ads, debates, caucuses and primaries, Sean Hannity and Chris Matthews, lots of prognosticating and speculating, to endure.

I hope that the debate is rigorous and robust. But I also hope, and perhaps hope against hope given the frayed nature of our body politic, that the debate can be civil, for the sake of our body politic, our life together. I worry about, and I pray for, our civic life, our citizenry, this democracy. That is not to be partisan, of course. I wouldn't do that, not only so as not to threaten our tax exempt status but because one of our theological statements – from 1700's England – reminded us that "God alone is Lord of the conscience," that is, that at the end of the day, these decisions are your decisions, and should never be inappropriately or inordinately influenced by anyone else, especially from the pulpit.

But to avoid partisanship is not to say that there are not political implications to be derived when we allow God to have an impact on that very conscience, that faith does not have an important role in the formation of our politics. When we first moved to Rochester, we visited Niagara Falls on a regular basis. I don't know how it is here, how often you visit the historic sites. On Friday, we visited Independence Hall, and heard the stories of the founding of our nation again. It is thrilling, and kind of daunting, to overlay that experience on our present moment. I was reminded that in one of those chairs sat John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, the lone minister to sign the Declaration of Independence, whose faith led him to that moment very clearly and very powerfully, even when others disagreed. He was right, and he was humble, and rightly so.

Hold onto your beliefs, a rabbi friend once said, with clarity, and gentleness and humility. That is, what we believe might be wrong, so we should hold on to those core values firmly, and with conviction, but also gently. Think about a time when you have changed your mind, on a big thing or a little thing.

I worry right now that the conversation linking faith and politics does not allow for any of that kind of give and take. That is to say, on many things of a political nature, people of faith and good will can disagree, but never, ever, ever, should we equate one political position with faith and the opposite with lack of faith. That is a worry right now to me, I must say. That's why we pray for an election season. We pray for those standing for office and those elected to serve us. We pray for all of us as we make decisions, for those with whom we disagree, even disagree strongly. And we pray for this nation, for its health and welfare in such a fraught season.

I was thinking about these matters – civility in the face of deep difference – in other ways this week as I did some research and reading for a writing project on the church, remembering a time not that long ago when we were fighting, and not always well, about a cluster of issues: what we believed about the Bible, and Jesus, and human sexuality. I received a letter or two, and read a blog post or two, calling me a heretic. Who would have thought!?!? And I remember, in my lesser moments, thinking less than Christian thoughts about those who disagreed with me. How could they be so “this” (fill in the blank), or how could they be so “that” (fill in the blank). A task force was formed, called the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, a big name, one that was based on one of our ordination questions. I was privileged to serve on that denominational task force, and though we made great progress, and offered what we thought to be a wise and compelling proposal to the church, not all agreed, even to the point where some left. So even as we pray for the nation, we pray, still, for the health of the church as it faces its own challenges and struggles.

How do we live together? How do we live together as a nation to become a more perfect union, a phrase ratified at that same Independence Hall? How do we live together as a church to become ever more like the body of Christ? How do we live

together? What values do we enlist? What principles do we activate? How do we persevere in the face of resistance, or disappointment, or rejection? How do we live together, particularly as people of faith, and how do the values of our faith make a difference, particularly in contentious times?

These are not new questions. The biblical story, from start to finish, is in many ways about this question – how will we live together. There are moments when things work well. We should pay attention to them. There are moments when things don't work so well. We should learn from them.

How we live together can be messy, conflicted, loving, uplifting, demoralizing. And often we strive to live up to aspirations in our common life even as we fall short. And sometimes we fall short and are so blind to it that we codify it – sinfully, tragically.

Our calling, I believe, as people of faith, is to identify when we've grotesquely mangled our understanding of common life, and fix it. Fix it on behalf of our commitment to simple human values like decency and civility and respect, liberty and justice for all. But at a deeper level fix it on behalf of our faith values, on our fundamental belief that we are all created in the image of God.

Not that we have it perfect, by any means. The church has, in its history, often been the best perpetrator of racism and sexism and other exclusionary practices. That's why this is even more urgent for us, to fix, to repair the breach, to reconcile, because when we listen to God and our better angels, we have a strong and clear sense of our calling.

These are not new questions. The bulk of the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the first churches were written to address conflict. Church conflict, imagine that!

Not more than 20 or 30 years after Jesus and already there were quarrels and factions and infightings. "For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you," Paul writes to the Corinthian church, "you are not of God." There are factions in the church, following different leaders. Leaders are taking credit for growth, and followers are willing to give that credit. Hence the infighting. Hence

the obscuring of the church's true mission. Paul reminds that whatever else happens, it is God who gives the growth. No one else.

This is a tremendous mission statement – “we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.” Remembering that we are God's servants puts us all at a place of equal footing, no place at the table more or less prominent than any others. And when the church, in whatever ways, suggests that any person's place is any less than any other's, our task is clear and compelling. Make it right. We cannot be the field, or the building, we are called to be, unless all of us are working together. Anything less is less than the gospel.

Jesus embodied what that looked like, and his words and actions led us fully to that vision.

Jesus' words are big ones this morning. He is interpreting the Ten Commandments, emphasizing what they always were – communal standards – rather than a legalistic checklist to earn God's favor.

He speaks about marriage, as well as the words we use to characterize others. This is a deeper conversation about morality than the one religion is often tagged with, so much more than a restrictive list of do's and don't's.

But he begins this morning with a challenge, an invitation to live life differently. He is discussing murder. What he suggests is that a broken relationship, a dispute, a conflict, with another, is something similar to murder, that a kind of death happens when two people are at odds with one another, are estranged. So much so that he says it is preferable to seek reconciliation with that sister or brother than to go to worship in the temple, that the very quality of our relationship with God is affected when we are alienated from another.

Seek reconciliation with those with whom we have a broken relationship. It is the point of “making amends” in the twelve-step movement. It is the goal of marriage and family counseling. It is the goal of mediation.

It is risky and vulnerable. But Jesus insists to us, and we know it to be true, that the risk is worth it. It is worth it on the personal and individual level, or in our closest circles, our families and friends. And it is worth it on the larger stages of our lives, our culture, our politics.

It was true in South Africa as something called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established after the abolition of apartheid. Witnesses who were identified as victims of human rights violations were invited to give statements about their experiences, and some were selected for public hearings. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from both civil and criminal prosecution. The commission was seen by many as a crucial component of the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa.

South African theologian John De Gruchy writes about the challenges of the process, and the hope found in it. Truth-telling. Forgiveness. Moral accountability. Restoration of justice. All of the things that we would seek for our national life at any point in its history. All the things we would seek for our life together as a church. (See De Gruchy's *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*)

In his wonderful book called *A Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of American's Public Life*, the Quaker theologian and educator Parker Palmer wonders if the church can become a community that recognized two realities, that we are broken and imperfect, AND forgiven and redeemed. A community that seeks reconciliation with those with whom you have a quarrel, as Jesus taught. A community united in Christ, rather than divided by factionalism, as Paul taught. A community where honest disagreement could happen, where unity – not uniformity – was the goal. Palmer writes (page 125) “If the church could become such a community – a place where people confront the stranger in each other and in themselves, and still know they are members of one another – it would help people enter the public sphere.” Imagine that, Palmer writes. Imagine that “the church can become a community that frees us from the fears that breed private seclusion and leads us instead toward the creative possibilities of public life.” (page 134)

Palmer wrote those words more than 30 years ago. The vision is as current as this morning's headlines, and is as old as the church – a community coming together, diverse in worldly condition and internal struggle and finding unity in mission – justice, reconciliation, hope. Think what a difference that would make in our life together, and for the life of the world into which we are called to serve, a world God loves so much. Amen.