



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE VANISHING VIRTUE”

Scripture Lessons: Titus 3:1-7

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, October 25, 2009.

Ordinarily Presbyterian ministers, myself included, like to prepare a sermon by going to the text first and then allowing the topic and the message to emerge from the scriptures. And consequently, it is considered ill-advised and even suspect to begin with a topic and then go to the scriptures in an effort to find support for a position already predetermined. But today I confess to doing the latter, but not without some justification. For weeks now I have wanted to address what seems to be a burgeoning incivility in our public life. Recent illustrations abound: South Carolina congressmen Joe Wilson calls the President a liar as he addresses a joint session of Congress; Rapper Kanye West grabs the microphone at an awards show and embarrasses a young singer named Taylor Swift by saying the award should be given to another; Serena Williams goes into a threatening expletive-laced tirade against a line judge on national TV during a U.S. Open; town hall meetings to discuss health care degenerate into shouting matches and fisticuffs; and, of course, boorish, ill-mannered and crude behavior and speech enters our cars and our homes over airwaves and fiber-optical cable nearly every day. And so it is that we are bombarded by inconsiderate and immodest language and behavior day in and day out. We find it on the right and on the left of the political spectrum, among women and men and among the religious and the non-religious. Conservative Glenn Beck accuses President Obama of having a “deep-seated hatred of white people,” while liberal Ed Schultz in speaking of health care accuses the Republicans of wanting “to see you dead” and that they would “rather make money off of your dead corpse!” Ann Coulter on TV just the other day made the outlandish comment arguing that all assassins are liberals.

Enough already! What has become of civil discourse and respectful disagreement? Is courtesy itself a vanishing virtue? Perhaps it is.

And thus, knowing that I wish to address the topic of courtesy in today’s sermon I went to the scripture for guidance and to the hymn book for supportive hymns for the day. But guess what? A search revealed no specific mention of courtesy or manners anywhere in our hymnal. And what is more, there is only one reference to courtesy in all of the Bible, and that is found in today’s passage from Titus 3.

Oh, I know, there are passages that could be applied to this discussion. Jesus warns of seeing your neighbor’s faults while you ignore your own. And he has given us the golden rule telling us to treat others as we wish to be treated. In the love chapter in I Corinthians 13:5 Paul writes that love “is not arrogant or rude”. J.B. Phillips paraphrases this by saying “Love has good manners.” And yet, the only specific reference to courtesy is Titus 3:2 where Paul charges Titus and the Christians of Crete in their continuing conflict with false teachers who were threatening the church “to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy to all people.”

I have another confession to make this morning. Not only did I choose today’s topic prior to choosing the text, but it is also true that in 37 years of preaching as an ordained minister, this is my first sermon based on a passage from the book of Titus. I was shocked to discover that earlier this week. I

can not imagine why this is the case. Perhaps it is because the theme of the book, the inseparable link between faith and practice, between belief and behavior, is dealt with so frequently in other better known passages that I have just overlooked this little book. And for those of you who think that if I preach from the lectionary this egregious omission would not have occurred, I consulted the common lectionary this week only to discover that the book of Titus appears in the three year cycle only on Christmas Eve, when most preachers are focused on classic text having to do with Advent and Christmas.

However, when it comes to the subject of courtesy, the epistle to Titus stands alone. Paul says something here that is said no where else in the sacred scriptures. And needs to be reiterated in our day. Christians are to show perfect courtesy.

One reason why courtesy receives such short-shrift in the scriptures maybe, not because it is unimportant, but rather because it is assumed and expected of one and all who follow the example of Jesus. Jesus knew what it was to have strong, abrasive and vindictive opponents, but he seldom if ever was offensive in his speech or rude in his conduct. When an entire city rejected him he was moved not to profanity but to tears. He was as courteous and respectful to prostitutes, lepers and tax collectors, to Gentiles and children as he was to governors and people in high positions within the realm. Those who were overlooked or dismissed by others found in him a gentlemen and a compassionate friend. Are not courtesy and consideration and kindness among the clearest ways by which we live out the gospel, showing deference and concern to others, even our enemies and out adversaries?

In saying that one reason why courtesy may receive scant attention in the New Testament is simply because it is assumed as standard operating procedure for God's people, I would support this by quoting from the Apocrypha. These books that Protestants call the Apocrypha (and Catholics called Deuterocanonicals) were written during the inter-testamental period, between the close of the Old Testament and the appearance of the New. On this Reformation Sunday let me remind us that our Reformer forbearers advocated that we read and learn from the Apocrypha. While they did not consider it scripture or authoritative they maintained that it was valuable for edification and insight into living. And in my research this week I found several passages from the Apocrypha that speak to our topic today, let me just read you some selected passages from the book of Sirach also called Ecclesiasticus, which relate to civility and courtesy.

22 There is no excuse for unjustified anger; it can bring about your downfall. 23 Wait and be patient, and later you will be glad you did. 24 Keep quiet until the right time to speak, and you will gain a reputation for good sense. **Sirach 1:22-24**

17 Son, be humble in everything you do, and people will appreciate it more than gifts. 18 The greater you become, the more humble you should be; then the Lord will be pleased with you. 20 The Lord's power is great, and he is honored by those who are humble.

24 Many people have been misled by their own opinions; their wrong ideas have warped their judgment. **Sirach 3:17-20, 24**

7 Before you start criticizing, get your facts straight and think the matter through. 8 Don't interrupt while someone is speaking; hear what he has to say before you answer. 9 Don't get into an argument over something that is none of your business. Don't take part in decisions that are being made by sinners. **Sirach 11:7-9**

9-10 Be certain about what you believe and consistent in what you say. Don't try to please everyone or agree with everything people say. 11 Always be ready to listen, but take your time in answering. 12 Answer only if you know what to say, and if you don't know what to say, keep quiet. 13 Speaking can bring you either honor or disgrace; what you say can ruin you. 14. Don't get a reputation for being a gossip, and don't tell tales that will hurt people. Just as robbers will suffer disgrace, so liars will suffer severe condemnation. 15 Do nothing destructive, whether it seems insignificant or not, and do not be an enemy when you should be a friend. A bad reputation brings you the disgrace that lying sinners deserve. 2 Do not let your passions carry you away; this can tear your soul to pieces like a bull. 3 You will be left like a dead tree without any leaves or fruit. 4 Evil desire will destroy you and make you a joke to your enemies. 5 If you are polite and courteous, you will enjoy the friendship of many people.

Sirach 5:9-6:5

Perhaps never in our lifetime has there been a greater need for civility, courtesy and common sense in the public square. Not only are anger, arrogance and caustic attacks on others offensive to God and to decent people, but they also undermine the issue about which the person may be so passionate. I for one have always believed that when people have to resort to name calling, to character assassination and to gross misrepresentation of their opponents' position, they are only giving evidence of their own ignorance, immaturity or the weakness of their chosen position. In truth, they are desperate.

Maybe you have heard the old story about the minister who often put in the margins of his sermon notes the initials PWIC. His wife who filed away his sermons each week asked him about the meaning of that cryptic notation and he explained it was a code meaning point weak, Increase volume!

Unfortunately Christians of various convictions can be as discourteous, as mean spirited, and as judgmental as those outside of any church and what a poor witness this makes to the world at large. Of course, Christians themselves will never all agree with each other either, even in the same denomination, or for that matter the same congregation. And dare I say it, even within the same household. If we can only remain in relationship with those who think as we think, who believe as we believe, then our churches and even our marriages will eventually dissolve.

Presbyterians disagree on many issues in both the civic and the religious realm, in the public and the private sphere. They have passionate and deeply felt convictions and see various solutions to pressing needs about us. In fact, what issue has not divided Presbyterians who value liberty of belief -- issues of war and peace, issues of race and gender, issues having to do with moral choices and ethical decisions, issues about education, the economy, the environment, issues related to technology, science and medicine, issues related to sexuality and ordination; issues having to do with the beginning and the ending of life. If we can not agree to disagree without being disagreeable and judgmental of one another then we have nothing helpful to say to a conflicted and divided world.

Now let me say a word of praise for the Presbyterian way of dealing with controversial issues in a productive and helpful way. On the back of today's bulletin you will find guidelines that were approved by our General Assembly back in 1992 to help guide congregations and officers as the church struggles with divisive matters. These guidelines have proved to be a blessing to the church at large and to many of us as individuals as well. When we employ these guidelines we lower the rhetoric; we listen and learn from our adversaries instead of dismissing or demonizing them; and we often find common ground as we make responsible decisions in the face of highly charged convictions. I also

think that when we do this we honor God and provide a constructive witness to the large community. If more of us who called ourselves Christian did so perhaps we could see something of a return to civility and courtesy in the world around us and within us.

For me, the greatest advice we find in these guidelines and perhaps the most demanding as well, are based on Paul's charge to the Ephesians: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Christ." Some people can be truthful and honest about what they believe and do but they are not very loving or respectful of others in the process. They sometimes even use the truth as a weapon and hit people over the head with it. Other people may be loving and considerate but they haven't the courage to be forthright and honest because they fear rejection or ridicule. But truth and love are both essential if resolution and reconciliation is to come about among people and if we are to remain in relationship, even with those who see and believe differently then we do.

In closing let me remind us of the wisdom of following Paul's advice to Titus, advice that was offered in another time of conflict and adversity. Let us "speak evil of no one, avoid quarrelling, be gentle, and show perfect courtesy to everyone." In so doing, God will be honored and God's people will be better served.

Courtesy may seem a trivial matter given the serious nature of problems in today's world, but if this virtue vanishes completely, the church and civilized society will be imperiled.

The poet Belloc has summed up the matter in these four lines:

Of Courtesy, it is much less
Then courage of Heart or Holiness.
Yet in my walks it seems to me
That the Grace of God is in Courtesy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.