

The Call to Kindness and Gentleness

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It's great to be back at the National Presbyterian Church. I've not only had the privilege of being in this pulpit before, but I've actually had some fun with this congregation, and several years ago Phyllis and I were privileged to be with you for your all-church retreat. We had some memorable experiences at that delightful gathering. As the president of Fuller Seminary it's also a privilege to be with you; the ties between Fuller Seminary and this great congregation are strong and deep, and we praise God for the wonderful ministries of National Presbyterian Church. It's an honor to be able to open God's Word with you this morning and reflect on this passage that has been read for us from 1 Peter, chapter 3. And especially these very important words from the 15th and 16th verses, where the apostle says, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

You know this verse: always be ready to offer a defense to anyone who asks of you. I was raised on that, and we always had very strong counsel to know what you believe and be ready to explain it at any time—especially to people who come with questions because they do not accept the truth of the gospel. But be ready at any occasion to defend the faith, to explain the faith, to give a reason for the hope that lies within you, and that's good. But seldom did they go on to read the next part of it: "But do so with gentleness and reverence." You know the apostle Peter in this whole epistle is concerned about a number of things, but two things stand out for me. The one is that over and over again he tells God's people—including us today—"you've got to do good things. You've got to be active in doing good, engaging good conduct."

If you go back to chapter 2, he is very clear about that with us as the people of God, aliens and exiles in a strange world in which we find ourselves. He says, "Do good deeds among the

Gentiles. Do good deeds in that larger world in which you find yourself so that even though people may on occasion complain that you're doing evil deeds, they may see your good works and glorify God on the Day of Judgment. Do the kinds of good deeds that God wants us to do.” And then secondly, he's very concerned that in doing these good deeds we have a certain kind of spiritual attitude toward our fellow human beings. You know right at the end of an important passage in chapter 2, verse 17, he summarizes the overall policy he's about to guide us in our interactions both in the church and in the world.

He gives us four commands in chapter 2 verse 17. He says we are to fear the Lord and we're to love the church. That's our life together. Now we only have one true and righteous ruler, and that's the Lord God and we've got to fear him. The word there is *phobio*. We've got to *phobio* God. We've got to be in a kind of deep and reverent unstinting obedience to God and all will be good. We've got to fear the Lord. We've got to love the church, the family of believers. In Greek *agapao* means *agape* love. We've got to *agape* love each other because we're brothers and sisters in Christ. But what about the larger world in which we make our way every day? Well, there he says, “Well, the authorities out there—you've got to honor the emperor.” You know the Greek word there is *timao*, which means “have regard for his well-being.” You've got to care about how authority gets exercised in the larger society. You've got to honor but not *phobeo*, not fear the emperor; you've got to honor the emperor.

What about our fellow citizens out there beyond the realm of the church? We've got to honor them too, and that's exactly the same verb, *timao*. You've got to have regard for the well-being of all human beings. And then he's repeating that in this passage here where he says that you've got to do good deeds. Even though they may accuse you of evil, don't be afraid, follow your conscience, because God wants us to do good deeds. But do everything with gentleness and reverence. That's that honoring thing: gentleness and reverence toward all human beings.

We had a fine time together yesterday morning here, talking about civility. You know I wrote a book on civility back in the early '90s and then revised it a few years ago. Then I got interested in the question of civility, of being civil, being publicly polite in the ways in which we

as Christians honor other human beings, even people with whom we strongly disagree because of their beliefs or their lifestyles. I got interested in that subject and inspired to write about it when I came across a wonderful line from Dr. Martin Marty, the great Lutheran theologian/historian, professor at the University of Chicago, and also a person often quoted in the press. In a little book that he wrote, this is the line that stood out for me: he said, “You know a lot of people today who are civil don’t have very strong convictions, and a lot of people who have strong convictions aren’t very civil. What we need is convicted civility.”

And actually that’s what this verse is all about. You’ve got to have convictions. In fact, be ready at any time to explain to anyone who asks of you the reason for the hope that lies within you. Strong convictions. But then do so with gentleness and reverence. That’s the civility part of it. When I wrote that book in the early ’90s, I had in mind the ways in which religion often just works in the wrong way in the world, creating violence and all kinds of divisiveness. What I had in mind in the early ’90s were Protestant and Catholic and Northern Ireland. Now Christian and Muslim in Eastern Europe. Parts of Munich and Kosovo. Arab and Jew in the Middle East. That’s the kind of thing I was thinking about as I wrote my book. But as soon as my book came out, about two weeks after it appeared, I got phone calls from two journalists, each of whom separately was writing a story on civility and the increasing incivility in our society, one for the *Boston Globe*, one for the *New York Times*. They obviously hadn’t read my book, but they had heard about a book coming out on civility and figured they wanted a few ideas for their stories.

What they asked me about wasn’t the Middle East or Ireland or Eastern Europe. They asked me about parking lots. And road rage on California freeways. And conflicts in the aisles of supermarkets. Increasing incivility in the very ordinary patterns of human life. And that too is a very important thing to talk about and to think about as Christians. This text in 1 Peter 3 again speaks to that topic. Both in the big issues of global realities and then in the small issues of making your way down the aisle of a supermarket or standing in line to get into the stadium or a theater, be ready at any time to give an account of the hope that lies within you—but do so with gentleness and reverence.

How do we do that? How do we cultivate that in ourselves? This morning I want to suggest three things that are important about responding obediently to the call to cultivate gentleness and reverence in the ways we treat people. The first is this: think about God's gentleness and reverence toward us. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And God loved us in our unworthiness and our brokenness and our rebellion before his face. It doesn't say that he had to wait for Jesus to die to like us, to be concerned about us. It says, "For God so loved the world that he sent his only son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." While we were yet sinners Christ died for us, and while they are yet sinners we ought to be concerned about people and be gentle and reverent toward people with whom we disagree and of whose behavior we may disapprove. That's important in the life of a church because we don't always get along well together and there are special ways to cultivate the kindness and gentleness, the *agape* love, within the life of the Christian community by remembering that we all belong to Jesus and Jesus has called all of us his friends.

When I was in seminary I worked for a while at a mirror factory. I was a prism inspector on the 11 to 7 night shift. My job was to inspect the prisms for rear view mirrors, and I had to do so many every hour. I had a quota, and that meant working pretty fast with great concentration in looking for flaws in any given prism, but on the piles that were in front of me. And I was told that by labor law I had to spend the last ten minutes of every hour not looking at mirrors, because you can go crazy looking at mirrors for eight hours straight. I was a seminary student, so the next morning I'd go to class and then go home and try to get some sleep. Sometimes I even slept a little bit in class in those days.

Typically there was an elderly night watchman at the factory who I really didn't like very much. He was uncouth; he was not very smart as I understood things. I did not find him an interesting person to talk to, and I'd want to take those ten minutes of each hour and memorize some Hebrew vocabulary or bone up on some church history for a test or a quiz the next day.

But typically he would show up and want to talk to me. And I was really very rude to him. I tried to get rid of him and he just did not get it. Then one night, I really wanted to read some

church history and I'd opened a book, and he came up and said, you really like books don't you? And I said—maybe I should have said “*Duh*” [Laughter]—“Of course I do.” And he said, “Yeah, Ernie liked books.” I said, “Ernie who?” And he said, “Ernie Hemingway.” I said, “What do you know about Ernie Hemingway?” He said, “Well, I spent a couple summers as his hunting and fishing guide. You know, we spent all day hunting and fishing and then we'd sleep in the same tent together, this little tent, and he'd be in his sleeping bag and I'd be in mine, and he always had this flashlight and a book. He always had a book. Ernie just loved books. And it was hard to go to sleep because he turned the page and then the flashlight would go in my eyes. And yeah, that Ernie he was quite a guy.”

I saw him a very different light all of a sudden and I wanted to find out more. And you know what changed my perception of him? He was a friend of Ernest Hemingway. He'd been with Ernest Hemingway.

Sometimes we just need to think about the person within the body of Jesus Christ with whom we disagree and say, “That person too has been with Jesus. That person too loves Jesus. That person too is someone to whom Jesus says, ‘You are my friend.’” What a friend we each have in Jesus. That might be an important reminder for us within the life of the church. But then what about those people out there? You know? They may not be very interesting or they may be very irritating or they may have lifestyles or beliefs that we simply despise or find disgusting. How are we to handle that?

The story is told of Pope John XXIII, the great pope who convened Vatican II and brought about so many wonderful reforms in the Catholic Church; before he was the pope he was the Cardinal Archbishop of Venice. The story is told that one day he had been alone in his private dining room, and at the end of a meal he was drinking a glass of wine from a fine crystal goblet, and as was the routine, a young priest came in who was assisting and reported to him, the Cardinal Archbishop, about the events that were going on in the archdiocese. And he went through some routine things as he sat there quietly sipping his wine. Then he started to tell the cardinal about a rogue priest, a rebel clergyman who was saying all kinds of nasty things about

him, the cardinal, and trying to undercut the authority of the church, and saying all kinds of heretical and wild things. As he reported this with some energy, the future pope just sat there sipping his wine from his fine crystal goblet.

Finally the young priest got upset with the cardinal and said, “Your grace, doesn’t it bother you that this guy is saying these things and doing these things? Doesn’t it make you angry?” And quietly the pope lifted what was by now the empty goblet, and he said, “Father, whose goblet is this?” And he said, “It’s yours.” The future pope then threw it on the floor and it broke into dozens of pieces, and he said, “And now whose is it?” And he said, “It’s still yours.” The future pope said, “That’s the way I see that priest. He is broken and shattered, but he’s still mine because he’s still God’s.” A very important reminder that even in serious brokenness and shatteredness and rebellion, our fellow human beings are still God’s sons and daughters created in his image. It’s important for us to respect that.

Second, an important thing for us to think about is our own shortcomings. You know one of my favorite psalms, as I mentioned yesterday at the conference, is Psalm 139. It’s a great psalm, incidentally, to read and memorize the first few verses for when you get on a plane in the morning: “And when I take the wings of the morning and fly to the outermost part of the sea thou art there. If I ascend above or descend beneath there too you’re with me.” The inescapable presence of God. It’s a wonderful psalm. There is a certain point in the psalm, though, where the psalmist seems to get in kind of an arrogant mood. Then he says, “Lord, I hate your enemies with a perfect hatred. You know, you and me, God, we’re on the same side, you can count on me. What you care about I care about, what you love I love, what you hate I hate.” And then all of a sudden it’s as if there’s a shift and he says *oh-oh, oops*. And he says something very different, in a different tone: “Lord, search me and know my thoughts and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way of the Master.”

That’s an important prayer for us to utter many times, but especially when we’re inclined to think that we’ve got it so tight with God that he must be so happy that we’re on his side. We oppose the people and maybe hate the people that he hates, and we have to remember that we

have to say to God in those moments, “O Lord, search my thoughts and know me, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Third, I think all this leads to a certain kind of seeing, a certain kind of contemplating of other people that’s necessary. One of the better-known Catholic philosophers of the twentieth century is named Joseph Peeper, who was a philosopher in Vienna. One of his delightful little books—it was a nice title: *Only the Lover Sings*—it’s less than one hundred pages, and it’s a series of very short meditations that he gave in response to an invitation from a sculptor friend, a sculptress who invited him to come to her sculpting studio and just give some talks to a group of her artist friends and colleagues—painters and sculptors.

Joseph Peeper, from a Christian perspective, talked about the need for the artist to prepare for artistic activity in terms of a certain kind of seeing. Then he quoted the ancient Greek philosopher Anaxagoras from the fifth century before Christ, a couple of centuries before Plato and Aristotle and Socrates. Now we don’t know much about some of these early Greek philosophers, but we have a few fragments. And some of the fragments from Anaxagoras, according to Joseph Peeper, were a kind of pagan pre-Christian catechism. You know we know the catechism here as Presbyterians: the chief end of man is to glorify—what is the chief end of man? “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” I don’t know if there’s something like that this pagan philosopher had in mind, but his first question was, why are we here? And the answer, a very simple answer: to behold. We’re here to engage, and it’s not just by looking at surfaces, but a kind of comprehensive beholding of people and things in the world. Joseph Peeper says, “That’s why we’re here. That’s what artists need to take very seriously: that we need to prepare for our art in a certain kind of beholding, a certain kind of seeing.” I like that emphasis.

That beholding isn’t just superficial; it’s the kind that goes beyond the surface, including the surfaces of people that we really don’t like very much. One of my favorite spiritual writers is Saint Teresa of Lucien, a nineteenth-century, French, 15-year-old girl. She wanted to be a nun. Her sister was already a nun—Carmelite convent—and she wanted to be a Carmelite nun. But

you had to be 18 years old to get into the convent, and so she petitioned a bishop: “I want to go right now. I’m 15, I’m ready.” The bishop kept turning her down. She finally petitioned the pope, and finally the bishop and the pope got so tired of her that they just let her go in at age 15. And she died when she was 24. But in those nine years in the Carmelite community she wrote a diary that has been published. It’s a wonderful little book called *The Journey of a Soul* or *The Diary of a Soul*; there are a couple different editions of it.

Teresa of Lucien was passionately in love with Jesus, and she talked a lot about Jesus. She talked a lot to Jesus in these journal entries. One of my favorites is a time when she says: “You know, Lord, there’s a nun who irritates me whenever I see her. Whatever she does or says I find her very irritating, and I’m sure the devil is behind all of this because he wants me to see all of these disagreeable traits in her. And I don’t want to give in to that natural dislike of her. So what I’m trying to do is to try to treat her as if she were somebody that I like.” And in order to do that, she says, “Every time I see her I pray for her and I offer you, God, all her virtues and her merits.” And then this wonderful line: she said, “I’m sure this would greatly delight you, Jesus, for every artist likes to have his works praised, and the divine artist of souls is pleased when we don’t halt outside of the exterior but we go inside to admire the beauty that’s there beyond the surfaces, you know.” She’d say, “You know how I handled this, it’s a lot like art appreciation. I try to see her as a precious divinely created work of art.”

Now if you look at the description of me in the bulletin you’ll notice that my wife is an art historian, and our son says that that means that his father has sat on some of the steps of some of the great art museums of the world. I’m aesthetically impaired to a certain degree, although I have tried the Louvre—my wife gets it much more quickly than I do. She sees it more accurately than I do. And so I have to work at looking at a Picasso and admiring it as a work of art. I have to work at a Louise Nettleson—see, I can name the names anyway. I need to work at it. And all of us need to work at certain kinds of things and especially in seeing the person that we disagree with, the person that we dislike, as a divine work of art. It takes something like the study and contemplation that goes into art appreciation.

Why are we here? Why are we here in church? To learn how to behold. To learn how to see things in the way in which God sees things. The way to learn how to see people in such a way that it pleases Jesus, because he is the artist who has created them and who loves them even in their brokenness. Lingering on the surfaces is not enough. We've got to get beyond the surfaces to a kind of art appreciation. Now we need to work at it—I need to work at it.

I felt really good about myself a couple of years ago when I stopped at the grocery store on the way home from work. I pulled into the parking lot, saw an empty space, and pulled into it—and suddenly someone was honking and honking, and I realized that the woman driving the car had been waiting for that parking space and I just cut right in and took it. I didn't mean to do it, but I did. I was thinking about whether I should pull out, but I could not because she was blocking me. So I turned around and she made an obscene gesture, honked two times and then screeched and went off. I decided I'd better go talk to her. I got out of the car and looked at where she went to park, at the furthest end of the lot, and walked over there just as she was getting out of the car. I said to her, "Ma'am, I really want to apologize. I'm the guy who took that parking space that you had been waiting for and I know it was wrong and I'm really sorry. I wish I hadn't done it and I'm sorry that I did what I did." She actually started to cry. And she said, "Just don't bother me; leave me alone. If you knew the kind of day that I've had"—and she turned around and stomped away. I just stood there, and suddenly she turned around with tears still flowing down her cheeks, and she said in a soft voice, "Thank you."

I felt so good about myself. I don't just write books about civility, and I don't just preach sermons on kindness and gentleness—I actually did it, you know. And I was feeling so good about myself. Two weeks later, I returned a rental car to Hertz near the airport, and got there just two minutes before the hour was up beyond which I would have to pay some more. But the attendant was talking to the man in front of me and the two minutes went by, and several more minutes went by. When he finally came back, the hour was over, and when he did his thing with that little machine it showed that I had to pay the extra hour. He said, "I'm going to have to charge you for the hour; you're a little bit late." And I said, "No, I was not late. I was here on

time. You were talking to that guy, and if you hadn't talked so much to that guy and gotten to me sooner I wouldn't have to pay that extra hour, and I'm not going to pay it."

He said, "I'm sorry, sir, I really had no other choice. That's what's going to go on your credit card, and I'm sorry, but that's the way it is." And I said, "What do you care? I don't care whether you're sorry or not, you're wrong; it's your fault. It's not my fault," and we just were going on and on. And his supervisor came over, a middle-aged African American woman, and she just said, "What's going on here?" and he said, "Well, this guy thinks he doesn't have to pay, and he claims you know that I'm at fault. But he really does have to pay—look at the ticket here." She just answered, "Let me take care of this, you can go." So he went away. And she looked at the ticket and said, "It's okay, you don't have to pay." I said, "Of course I don't have to pay. I was the one who was here, it was his fault." And she said, "Honey, you need a hug."

Then she hugged me. In a Hertz parking lot. Then I walked away, and then I turned around and I said to her in a gentle voice, "thank you." You know, sometimes we need a hug. Maybe you need a hug from God this morning. You know, actually, early on in this passage, the apostle quotes the psalmist and reminds us that God hears the prayers of his people. He listens to our prayers. And the psalmist says a wonderful thing: he says that the Lord God inclines his ear toward us. You know the image that the psalmist is using there is that God bends over and gets right down close to us and listens to us. I saw this in Dulles the other day, in a young mother with a little, maybe three-year-old girl. The little girl was cranky and crying, and the mother said, "What's wrong?" And suddenly she just leaned over and put her arms around the little girl and put her ear up to the little girl's lips, and the little girl whispered something to her. That's the image of the psalmist: there are times that God so wants to hear our prayers that he inclines his ear toward us by leaning over and putting his ear right next to our lips—and then he actually gives us a hug.

We're here this morning in church to worship the God in whom resides true and perfect gentleness. One important way in which we can go from this place is to be a kinder and gentler people, being reverent toward people precisely because they are created in the image of the

living God. Just to feel the hug, to feel the embrace of that God who has drawn near to us. In Jesus Christ.

Holy God, we praise you for the Lord Jesus. We praise you that while we were yet sinners he died for us, that your love sent him into the world. And may your love also send us as ones who have experienced your gentleness and your kindness toward us as sinners. May we go from this place as your kind and gentle people, and I pray this in the strong name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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