

On Being Civil

9/1/24

(Song of Solomon 2:8-13; James 1:19-27; Mark 7)

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As you know, I was trained in a Seminary, where I spent a good amount of time with scriptures like this morning's; scriptures which counsel us to be kind and civil to each other. And I felt that these sentiments were reinforced by my upbringing in a reasonably civil family. We had our arguments and we had did have some beauties, but generally we treated each other well.

And having spent much of my life in and around churches, I also have a reasonably good understanding of how people are expected to treat each other in a congregation. We aren't perfect, but we do seek to watch our words and actions, not tearing each other down, but with an eye to building each other up.

I'd like to think that this training in civility has the upper hand in our lives. Because today I'd like to mention another kind of training that shaped my character. When I was 18, I joined the army and went to Basic Training at Fort Leonard Wood, in Missouri. I signed up to be a Combat Infantryman, not for any noble reason, but because I thought it would be exciting to throw grenades and shoot weapons and run

around in the forest. I wanted to grow into the image I had of myself as a real man.

The training was fairly rigorous, with early morning runs, not enough time to eat, and with too much time standing at attention and marching about. From the time we got off the bus, the drill sergeants shouted in our ears, calling us colorful names and barking orders at us. It was all a bit bewildering

But how hard the training was, really depended on what shape you were in and how much attention the drill sergeants thought you needed. Thankfully, I was in pretty good shape and I learned quickly to keep my mouth shut and do what I was told, and so everything worked out for me and I made it through.

One morning while we were running in formation, one of the heavier trainees started to fall behind. First the drill sergeant yelled at him to keep him running, and then he sent a couple of us back to grab his arms on both sides to keep him running. You could say it became an exercise in leaving no one behind.

When we got back to the barracks the poor fellow looked pretty bad. He had fallen down several times and we had even had to drag him part

of the way, so that the tips of his boots were sheared off and his knees were bleeding.

I was one of the soldiers who fell back to keep him moving and I remember feeling a mixture of pity and scorn. I felt pity, because, to my mind, we had gone too far and rather than being an exercise in leaving no-one behind, he had become an example of the humiliation that would come our way if we failed. I feared that the poor guy would be deeply scarred by the way he was treated. But I also felt scorn, because he couldn't keep up. I shared the opinion of the soldiers who saw him as a "dead weight" and called him far worse things under their breaths.

There is a kind of cruelty and pride that can come over a person, especially in a testosterone laden situation like Basic Training. I learned how to behave and think in a pitiless manner. And my vocabulary was harsh and crude. It wasn't a hard thing to do, because I already knew how to hide my kinder, gentler true self.

So, I was well trained in both of these two schools; one school where you are taught to be compassionate and kind and where intimacy is thought of as a positive thing, and another where intimacy and vulnerability are seen as threatening and being tough and unfeeling is how you get your respect.

There is something fascinating about being a witness to cruelty, which movie makers understand, because they constantly spice up our movies with it. But there is also something soul crushing about it, especially when we are the object of it or the perpetrator.

I think that there are many people, I would guess that all of us, if we look deeply enough, both male and female, are in one way or another a product of both these kinds of training.

Self- Control

I want to say something about our military here, so that you don't misunderstand me. Even though I am highlighting the cruelty I encountered, I also met a lot of very commendable people; people who understood that the true purpose of being a soldier is not to express cruelty; and that there is a higher purpose to defend the wellbeing of our fellow citizens and to keep the peace as well as possible, with as little bloodshed as possible. That is a noble calling.

There are many soldiers who understand this and are able to be tough in a way that always seeks the most compassionate outcome. I think of

people like Generals Petraeus and Colin Powell, Milley and others as great examples.

I have great respect for these true soldiers, because it takes discipline to respond constructively to being provoked or attacked rather than give in to our natural instinct to hit back and destroy the things we see as threats.

But it is my understanding that this very ability to be self-controlled in the way we respond to threats is a main trait that separates Great Civilisations from Banana Republics. It is the ability to control our responses for the greater good. And this starts with the tongue. As it says in the Book of James, We must have “bridles” for our tongues.

So why bring up these two ways of being that I believe have shaped us all to some degree?

Tiptoe Through the Tulips

I think it was my response to our first reading for today that got me thinking about it. My first impulse was to ridicule and dismiss it as frivolous. And when I wondered why I felt so dismissive, these were the memories that came to mind.

It is quite an unusual reading. It is about young love, with flowery and intimate language that could make you blush and turn away. And it expresses a level of intimacy that makes some of us, including myself, uncomfortable. It makes me want to change the subject to power tools or the weather.

A young person comes bounding through the hills looking for his beloved. He finds her and is so excited that he is reduced to being like a peeping Tom, hiding behind the wall and gazing at her through the latticework. My heart be still! It makes me think of Tiny Tim, tiptoeing through the tulips and then leaping about joyfully singing a song of Spring and calling to his beloved to come frolic with him!

The passage is really a very straightforward expression of young love; and when I see young people around me, who are in love, I'm happy for them. I believe in love.

And so I have to ask myself; why I have this impulse to ridicule and squash the same playful innocence in myself? Why is there a part of me that is afraid to look this kind of ecstasy and intimacy in the eye? Why does hearing it make me want to change the subject? And where does the impulse to make fun of it come from? I've already attempted a partial explanation.

The funny thing is that the person who is being described is actually a dead ringer for who I was in my youth. I was “secretly” an incredibly romantic person. I was filled with rapturous feelings of devotion to the various girls who captured my imagination. I was so captivated by them that I could only hide behind a wall and watch them through the latticework, so to speak. I suspect that the feelings of devotion to God that I experience today are related in some way to the ardor of my youth and those romantic feelings.

Does fear drive our uncivility toward each other?

One of the things I like about the Nativity story at Christmas time and also the story of the birth of Moses, (two stories which have a lot similarities), is the way the people who are gathered around them jump into action or pool their energies to protect them. They recognize that there is something so precious about these vulnerable infants that they are willing to go to great risk to protect them.

The wise men protect the baby Jesus by **not** returning to King Herod to tell him where the baby is. And Mary and Joseph whisk him away into hiding in Egypt, to avoid the genocide against new born infants that Herod carries out in an effort to stamp him out.

Likewise, Moses's sister, the Pharaoh's daughter and Moses's Mother work together in that story to protect the infant Moses from the Pharaoh's decree that all male Hebrew infants be put to death.

Both of these stories are about protecting something very innocent and joyful that we see in our children and our own childhoods that the world sees a need to crush. It is a joyfulness and vulnerability that is also a raw expression of the Good News of Jesus.

And I think that part of the message there is that, we need to defend, not only our children, but also that child-like place of joyful devotion and rapturous love within ourselves and in each other. And we can share in that work as a community, the way the gatherings around Jesus and Moses did. It is something I believe we must do, because there are forces in the world and within ourselves that would stamp it out and leave us cold, and cynical and ultimately cruel.

We are living in a time in which among other things, the sword of the tongue is being used by many to divide, to ridicule and humiliate, all for the sake of power. It is a time in which we need to remind ourselves that being civilized means being capable of self-control. And it is a time to remind ourselves that God wants us to use that self control to

protect the youthful joy and inner beauty that is so easily buried, but that is there waiting to shine forth within us all.