

Being Nice Isn't Easy

Prayer: *And now, O God, we humbly ask that the peace of Christ might rule in our hearts, that you would silence in our hearts any voice but your own, so that hearing your word, we might also come to obey your will, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I had never watched the program until the pastor from Yarnell said a couple from his church would be on television. He wrote in an email, "... watch the program called 'Dirty Jobs' tonight."

The host of the program "Dirty Jobs", Mike Rowe, has tried his hand at hundreds of the dirtiest and most disgusting jobs. He has served slop to pigs, removed bones from fish, hunted plagues of vermin, and sloshed around in sewers.

That night he was in Yarnell, Arizona visiting a couple who catch, raise, and sell venomous spiders, tarantulas, scorpions, etc., etc. Mike Rowe has real curiosity about challenging jobs, and respect for the men and women who do them. The show sends a powerful message that dirty work has dignity and often a deep satisfaction to the people who do those dirty jobs. Is this not a great message for the day before Labor Day?

In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus desired peace amongst his followers ... and that was and is a difficult and even dirty job. *"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."* (Matt 18:15) *"Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."* (Matt. 18:19-20)

This section in the Gospel is all about listening and respecting others in the church who disagree with you. ***And Being Nice Isn't Easy***... and it is a really tough job.

According to Jesus we have to do it over and over again. God is willing to do the most disgusting job — the removal of our sin through the gift of forgiveness. All God asks is that in turn and do the same for others. All of it when it is played out in the life of the church brings honor and respect ... even when we disagree.

There were obviously issues of deep conflict in the early church. Unresolved conflict is extremely frustrating and wearisome. We all know that our faith literally begins and ends with forgiveness through love: our own forgiveness of ourselves and our forgiveness of others. We all know that we express our love and forgiveness of other by being nice, but ***Being Nice Isn't Easy***.

You remember the prayer offered by one small child: "Dear God, make all the bad people good and all the good people nice."

In the original school of Christian discipleship two thousand years ago, there was an apostle named Peter who was always trying to assume the top position in his class. From his teacher's point of view, there was no way that one could overemphasize the value of working

together and being nice. Time and again Jesus had emphasized the essential nature of the gospel he was bringing: “*Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you.*” (Matthew 5:44) “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*” (Matthew 5:7) “*When someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek.*” (Matthew 5:39)

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus specifically used the word “church” and gave instruction on how we are to behave in this community. Jesus does not leave us in some heavenly realm detached from earthly life. He did not teach things that were only “spiritual.” He demands that we practice the way of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

Jesus gives us instruction on how we are to function in the church. He tells us how to respond when someone in the church offends us, offering a practical way to settle church disputes. The inner life of the church has specific consequences. The members of every church spend so many hours of their lives dealing with seemingly small, insignificant matters of church life. And so, when we hear these words there is a pleasing confirmation of your work, some of which has been a dirty job. We have all refereed squabbles in the church, worked for the unity in the church, and done good work for the kingdom of God.

Yet, Being Nice Isn’t Easy.

But then Jesus ends his teaching by the even more astounding claim that “... *whatever we bind on earth is bound in heaven.*” He promised that where just two or three of us are gathered together, then he is there too. The church, this all-too-human earthly institution, has been given extraordinary powers by the Lord of the church. Peter accepted that to follow Jesus, meant respect, honor, and forgiveness had to take the place of vengeance in the heart of every disciple. But Peter still did not like the idea very much and wanted to know how often he had to do it. “*If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?*”

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I have come to love this congregation and enjoy being your pastor. You all know that I have been a pastor for a long time and I am now in my fortieth year. You know what has changed the most in all those years? For me it is that everywhere I go, I am confronted by conflict and disagreement. Not so much in this congregation today, but there was a great deal in the air six years ago when I arrived. When I go to anything in the community, the presbytery, or read about things on the national scale ... everything is about conflict. Even this past week while so many Americans are suffering from hurricane damage and our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is on sight seeking helpful Presbyterian volunteers and financial support ... our congressmen are telling people the government will be there to help after we discuss where we are going to cut the budget to find the money. In our everyday world, ***Being Nice Isn’t Easy.***

The church is of God, a creation of Christ’s convening call. And yet, the church is also very much of humanity – ordinary women and men trying to get along together in a human organization ... with all the weaknesses and flaws of any human gathering. My calling by God as a pastor was and is to preach the word, to point people toward Christ’s forgiveness for our lives. Yet, I am also a leader, a manager, an administrator of a very human institution, the church. The church is a thoroughly human body with all the aches and pains and flaws of any human body.

Jesus says some wonderful things about the church, calling us “salt” for the world, “light” in the darkness. He does not deny the problems that can occur in the church. In our text Jesus

does not say, “If your church is not really a true church with all its disagreements. . . .” Instead Jesus says, “There will be disagreements, there will be hurts and wrongs committed in the church, and when that happens you are to care enough about your sister or brother to act, to respond in love.” This is a word to all of us in the church. I wish we could get beyond all these squabbles and arguments and meetings and get on with the real business of the church.

In our congregation, *Being Nice Isn't Easy*.

Yet, settling our disputes in a Christ-like way is the real business of the church. The easiest thing would be to sweep our differences under the carpet, put a smile on our faces, and deny the disagreements. Jesus commands us to work for reconciliation. Much is at stake here, nothing less than the survival of the Body of Christ as the body of Christ. Have you ever thought that the time you spend serving on committees, giving of yourself and your gifts, is more than just participating in a volunteer organization? Maybe your work here is heavenly, reign-of-God work.

The world out there looks at us . . . the church community, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and this congregation as the model of what Christians look like. At our staff meeting, Gloria shared a column from an early August edition of the *Arizona Republic*. The author wrote: “A faith that conforms exactly to the contours of a political ideology has lost its independence. Churches become clubs of the politically like-minded.” Yet I regularly hear comments that the church should be doing this or that . . . or the church should not be doing this or that. Most days I wonder, what would Jesus be telling us to do today? We are about an adventure of loving Jesus more dearly and following him more nearly.

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Many of you have read the autobiography entitled *The Hiding Place*, where Corrie Ten Boom, tells a story about visit to a church, where she was sharing about the importance of forgiveness.

As she left the pulpit and came down to the audience, she noticed a man coming toward her, his hand extended. She recognized him as the chief guard at the prison camp where her sister had died and where both of them had been incarcerated. His face was beaming. “‘How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,’ he said. ‘To think that, as you say, Jesus has washed my sins away.’”

Corrie Ten Boom found herself paralyzed as the guard thrust out his hand to shake hers and she could not raise her hand. “Even as the vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. . . . I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of love or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him, give me your forgiveness.” She was able to move her hand, and as she touched his hand, flesh to flesh, she writes, “from my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him . . . and so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges but on Christ. When he tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.” (p. 238).

That kind of acceptance comes in love without any conditions. Forgiveness comes through love with no strings and to do anything less is to be just like the unforgiving servant. Love, respect, and honor of the other person in the life of the church . . . in the community where we all live . . . is the discipleship we have been called to serve.

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The honoring and respect of that other human being is not an act of will, but rather it is a function of love and grace from God. We cannot make ourselves love anyone. No, but we can make the intellectual connection between our brokenness and God's acceptance. Yes, forgiveness and love, honor and respect are all at the core of our Christian life for me, you, our family, and life in our world.

Being Nice Isn't Easy ... but it is what our Christian faith is all about.

Scriptures: Psalm 149; Matthew 18:15-21