

## “The Rules of Civility”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

June 6, 2021

*Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. <sup>3</sup>And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup>In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup>For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*

*<sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. <sup>11</sup>For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup>So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

*<sup>13</sup>But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke" —we also believe, and so we speak, <sup>14</sup>because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. <sup>15</sup>Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*

*<sup>16</sup>So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, <sup>18</sup>because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:1-18)*

When he wrote to the churches he planted, the apostle Paul would often teach them about ethics – helpful, practical guidelines on how Christians should treat one another. He urged them to have good manners, especially when the church gathered together for meals. For example, when we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in a few moments, much of what we will do and say will be guided by Paul's ethical teaching.

And, as you know, it's about much more than manners. Even Emily Post, in her famous book, wrote that "Etiquette must, if it is to be of more than trifling use, include ethics as well as manners."<sup>1</sup> As I see it, the primary difference between manners and ethics is that manners talk about behaviors that are good to do and not good to do, but ethics always rest those rules on moral foundations. Ethics always speak to the **why** – **why** certain things are good to do or not to do... **why** we choose to live our lives in certain ways.

I will admit I did some thinking about these whys and hows when I realized that God was calling me to be your pastor. We all know that manners differ from house to house, city to city, and especially region to region. Having been raised in the South, with the farthest north I had ever lived being the D.C. suburbs of Northern Virginia, I felt the need to do some

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Post, "Etiquette, Manners, and Ethics," <https://www.boston.com/news/jobs/2016/03/10/etiquette-manners-and-ethics/>, accessed June 2, 2021.



research and prep about life and ethics in the North. I started with some early episodes of “Welcome Back, Kotter,” because many of you have Brooklyn connections. Then I watched the whole “Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” series on Prime Video and that Netflix one that Fran Lebowitz did with Martin Scorsese. Add in the gracious help of John Irving, who has appointed himself my “cultural translator,” and I’m pretty much up to speed.

In all seriousness, ethics are important in any context where people are trying to live together peaceably and respectfully. This was well-known to the Southern man who would become the father of our nation, George Washington. There is a notebook, now in the Library of Congress, that was used by Washington in his early schooling, and one of the biggest sections of that personal notebook was titled “110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation.” These rules became deeply ingrained in Washington’s character. According to historian Richard Brookhiser, the list was probably used as a penmanship exercise, and it was based on rules originally composed by French Jesuits in the 1590’s. So, the list was originally grounded in Christian ethics. It was translated into English sometime in 17<sup>th</sup> century, and an abbreviated version crossed the Atlantic to Virginia in the 1740’s.<sup>2</sup>

There is some wonderful wisdom in this list. Right off the bat, Rule #1 reads “**Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect to those that are Present.**” Being respectful to the people around you – that’s a great start.

Rule #2 “**When in Company, put not your Hands to any Part of the Body, not usually Discovered.**” Some of these are best left without comment. But another good rule.

Rule #6 may actually be my favorite: “**Sleep not when others Speak.**” A number of you, who shall remain nameless, may be violating this rule at this very moment.

Some of the rules, however, went beyond the obvious into more subtle territory. “**Be no Flatterer... Superfluous Complements and all Affectation of Ceremonie are to be avoided, yet where due they are not to be Neglected.**” In other words, speak the truth, but with discretion. Be careful with flattery, lest people conclude you blow hot air for selfish reasons. Give credit where credit is due, but be measured and thoughtful about it.

But there is one rule in particular that I want to focus upon in our time this morning, because it gets right to the heart of the ethic that Paul was impressing on the Corinthians in the passage we have read this morning. Washington’s Rule #3 was “**Shew Nothing to your Friend that may affright him.**”

It is, I’ll admit, a well-mannered guideline. It’s generally good to keep our conversations civilized and positive and not scary. But we don’t have to work too hard to find some needed exceptions to this rule. Yes, a topic may be scary, but that does not necessarily mean it should not be discussed, especially with a friend. Too often, we never really address the elephant in the room. Sometimes, we work so hard to avoid the topics that could “affright” our friends that we start denying that the scary thing exists at all. Like Scarlett O’Hara, we say “I can’t talk about that now. I’ll go crazy if I do. I’ll talk about that tomorrow.” And then tomorrow never comes.

I think Paul was seeing this in the church, and he was worried that the ethical fabric of the community was beginning to fray. There were things that were not being talked

---

<sup>2</sup> “George Washington’s Rules of Civility,” <https://www.npr.org/>, originally aired as part of Weekend Edition on May 11, 2003; <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/rules-of-civility/>, accessed on June 4, 2021.

about – to use Paul’s words, “shameful things that one hides.” Some people seem to have been dealing in ways that were not completely above board -- “practicing cunning” or even “falsifying God’s word.” About these kinds of things, Paul makes one thing crystal clear to the Corinthians: although keeping unpleasant things hidden may seem like good manners, it is not a good ethical practice. It is not rooted in honesty or respect. It is not healthy, Paul says, to avoid every difficult topic.

Now, Paul does not use this word, but what he is talking about is what we might call “transparency.” “We renounce the hiding of things,” Paul says. “We refuse to be deceptive. We will not be false.” Instead, Paul teaches that “*by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.*” Like Christ himself, we will let the light shine into the darkness, so that what is broken might be restored, and what is ailing might be made well. And if that is our way, then it may sometimes mean that we have to bring up topics that some of our friends may consider frightening.

As always, Paul never promoted an ethic for others that he did not apply fully to himself. When we look at Paul’s life, we see that he never pretended to be perfect when he knew that he was not. Paul was willing to speak honestly about the errors – murderous, duplicitous, insidious errors of his past. And he never shied away from tough conversations. In other words, Paul violated Washington’s rule all the time. Paul was always “shewing” his friends things that may have “affrighted” them. When something was broken or wrong, he talked about it. This was done in grace, in love, and often with tenderness – but always with courage and honesty.

It was, for example, not a light thing to say that we human beings are made of clay. Everyday earthenware would not have been fired as much as fine pieces, which meant that these jars were common – easily cracked, easily broken. These are not virtues that we normally celebrate. Toughness and strength are laudable. Weakness and fragility is not. To tell a friend that he or she is as brittle as a jar of clay is not a compliment.

And yet here is the radical core of Paul’s ethical teaching. In the life of Christ, weakness becomes strength. In the life of Christ, what seems foolish can be wise. To find your life, you must be willing to lose it. So, Paul is a lot more worried about the ethics of Christ than he is about manners. With Christ as the foundation, it is not always a bad idea to “*shew your Friend something that may affright him.*” We should not always shy away from the difficult conversations. Because in Christ, this is not weakness. In the life of Christ, this kind of radical transparency and honesty – spoken in love and hope – can be our greatest strength. In fact, I think Paul would say that we cannot truly be the church unless and until we embrace this kind of vulnerability.

In her research on emotional wellness and happiness, Brené Brown has consulted with all kinds of groups — religious groups, corporate groups, even military groups. A few years ago, she was working with a group of special forces soldiers, and she shared with them her definition of vulnerability. Vulnerability, Brown says is defined by three things: “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.” And then she asked these obviously courageous people a question. “Can you give me,” she asked, “one example of a time when you have experienced or seen courage that did not involve uncertainty, risk, or emotional exposure?” There was a long silence. Finally, one young soldier stood up and simply said, “Three tours, ma’am. There is no courage without vulnerability.”

What is true for us as human beings is also true for us as the Church. The witness of Christ is, at its core, an exercise in vulnerability. As we pick up our own crosses and follow,

we too are called into uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure in our own witness. There is no discipleship, there is no courage, and there is no church without spiritual vulnerability. So, as we gather together as the body of Christ, we have to be able to trust one another enough to be lovingly honest with one another.

Interestingly, you have actually expressed a desire for more of this kind of honesty. In the mission study you completed over the past few years, many of you said you wanted LAC to be the kind of community where we do not always have to pretend we are perfect – a place where we can be honest about our cracks and scratches and flaws – a place where we can be OK with being jars of clay, where we can dare to be more honest and vulnerable with one another. You say you want this because you hope it will lead to greater connections with one another... greater intimacy as a church. And that hope shows that you already intuitively know what Paul desperately wanted the Corinthians to know – that when we dare to embrace more vulnerability and take more of those kinds of risks, we ironically end up feeling safer, and we end up being stronger, as a result.

Who knows -- before we know it, we might just be the kind of community that can boldly and proudly claim with Paul, “Yeah, we aren’t perfect. In fact, *‘We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; [we are] perplexed, but not driven to despair; [we are] persecuted, but not forsaken; [we might be] struck down, but [we are] not destroyed.’*”

And yeah, we might have some dings and scratches and cracks, but we might actually take pride in the pains that we are able to overcome together, because they will show the world how our lives really are following the life of Jesus – that his life really is visible in our lives... to use Paul’s words *“that the life of Jesus [is being] made visible in our mortal flesh.”*

The morality of the world says **“*Shew Nothing to your Friend that may affright him.*”** The ethics of Paul, the ethics of the Church, and the life of Christ himself all say, “Do not fear, only believe.”

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