

## Civility and Friendship

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I couldn't agree more with Professor Davis' appeal to the Christian call to reconciliation as a way to bring civility back into public discourse in our country. But my experience as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) makes me wonder whether anyone will hear it.

I am reminded of a similar appeal by the theologically diverse *Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church*, which was created in 2001 by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to "develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discern the matters that unite and divide us...."

Presbyterians found themselves deeply divided over the issues of biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, sexuality and ordination. In response to this crisis, among other things, the task force offered resources on constructive engagement and encouraged sessions and presbyteries to use them to discover "ways that the church can live more faithfully in the face of deep disagreements."

The task force concluded its 45 page report by pointing to the prayer Jesus prayed on the night before he died, as recorded in John's Gospel – a prayer that we might all be one and that our identity as his disciples would be confirmed by our love for one another. Convinced that the world was watching the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as we engaged in highly publicized debates, the task force wrote "At a time when people readily kill one another over their differences, a church [whose members love one another despite differences that threaten to divide us] will capture the attention of a polarized world."

Despite the testimony of the task force members about the relationships they developed during their time together and their recommendation that sessions and presbyteries engage in a similar process, just six years later, we find ourselves poised on brink of schism. Apparently, we have not discovered ways we can live more faithfully in the face of deep disagreement, nor have we been able to promote the peace, unity and purity that our ordination vows require us to pursue.

In the wake of the amendment to our Book of Order that allows openly gay, partnered Presbyterians to be ordained to ordered ministry, the rhetoric around division and unity, reconciliation and love has been ramped up once again. But the conversations, I fear, have largely been taking place among our camps rather than between them. Other than the occasional letters and blogs back and forth, I haven't heard or seen much among my colleagues that suggests any real conversation is taking place.

One group of dissatisfied Presbyterians is working to form a new denomination called the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians and others are waiting to see what this year's General Assembly will do before they stake their claim to the PCUSA, the new denomination or some version of both. People around the world are still readily killing one another over their differences, and the church is still unable to "capture the attention of a polarized world."

Perhaps our first step toward reconciliation is to learn how to be friends – not the kind of friends you have until they no longer serve your purposes, but the kind of friends that Jesus called his disciples.

In 2005, I traveled to Israel and Palestine with a group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders from Atlanta. We went to explore the holy sites of each of our different religious traditions and to develop relationships, hoping to promote peace, one person at a time. We ate together, we

prayed together, we worshiped together and we studied each other's religious traditions together.

Going to Israel when Jewish settlers were being forcibly evacuated from their homes in Gaza, was challenging to say the least. We didn't go there to talk politics or to solve the issue of peace in the Middle East, but it was hard to ignore the tension we felt among ourselves, each person clinging fast to their own understanding about what was happening and who among the rest of the group could be trusted as an ally.

Nearly a third of us had traveled together on an earlier pilgrimage to Turkey and had developed trusting and lasting friendships as a result. But even these friendships were challenged by this pilgrimage. It was hard to ignore our differences with signs of division and hate all around. Ribbons of red and blue were tied to car antennas to signal whether the drivers supported or opposed the Gaza evacuation and walls and fences to separate Jews and Muslims and Christians were going up before our very eyes.

In spite of the festering of deep wounds in that region, several friendships blossomed. One in particular that touched me was the abiding friendship between a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim woman. They had met and developed a relationship in Turkey, so when we prepared to travel to Ramallah, where the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority were located, he asked her to be his companion for the day.

Afterwards, he said he could not have gone to Ramallah that day if she had not been with him. He had never traveled to the West Bank and was so afraid for his safety, that he removed the most visible sign of his Jewish identity. He took his kippah off his head.

Despite her own feelings about the Jewish State's occupation of the West Bank, the Muslim woman agreed to stay close by him the whole day, walking with him as we were led through the areas where many of her Muslim brothers and sisters still lived as refugees in their own homeland.

To be a friend means to take seriously what the other takes seriously, and in Jesus' case, it is the command to love. To imitate Jesus as friend means to love those whom he loved. And Jesus often demonstrated his love for people with whom the disciples did not associate: the Samaritan woman he met at the well, for example.

His disciples would have been shocked to hear Jesus asking for a drink of water from this woman, because in so doing, he set aside conventional social norms and ignored centuries of hostility between their communities.<sup>1</sup> Reaching out to her, Jesus' love transformed her from a once despised outsider to a friend and a disciple.

In the ordination vows that deacons, ruling elders and teaching elders make, we promise to be a friend to our colleagues in ministry, to love our neighbors and to work for the reconciliation of the world. But when we look to Jesus' example, we realize how much this vow asks of us. It is hard enough to be a true friend to people with whom we share a common heritage or belief system, but reaching out in love to those who don't share our perspective on issues close to our hearts is a daunting task.

But if we call ourselves Christians and say that we seek to follow Jesus, are we not also called to be friends to people who don't see things as we do? One writer puts it this way, "Either we are

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

about being friends with God and each other or we are about why some people are our friends and others aren't. If we are the latter, we are not following Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

When our interfaith group prepared to leave Israel, we arrived at the Tel Aviv airport four hours before our flight was scheduled to leave. At the time, I thought it was ridiculous that we had arrived so early, but it didn't take long to understand why.

Things went well for the first part of the security check, only a few of us having to open our bags for inspection, but as soon as the first Muslim woman approached, the checking intensified dramatically. I watched from a distance, as they began unloading their suitcases, one item at a time, wondering how long this might go on.

As the bag checking ended and security officers came forward to take the women to be searched more fully in a private setting, the rabbis in our group converged on them. Insisting in Hebrew that they would accompany the women, each of them paired up and followed the entourage as it left the main area.

It was quite a sight, I imagine, to see a group of Jewish rabbis intervene on behalf of these Muslim woman in a highly secured Israeli airport. In a country where many Jews would have nothing to do with a Muslim, these rabbis set aside local social conventions and years of hostility between their people to reach out to these outsiders and bring them into their circle of friendship.

We did, in the end, need the full four hours to catch our flight, as the last rabbi came running down the concourse just as the last boarding call was being announced. As he approached the gate, tears started streaming down my face. These rabbis acted as true friends to the women. They didn't lay down their lives, but they stood by them in a way that demonstrated a concern that put the women's welfare on an even footing with their own.

I thought it odd at the time that Muslims and Jews were able to teach me how to follow Jesus, but my experience was not so different from what members of the Theological Taskforce on Peace, Unity and Purity discovered in their relationships with each other. They didn't wait until it was time to vote on an issue about which they disagreed before they spoke to (or at) each other. Instead, they spent time getting to know one another.

They worshiped together, studied scripture together and prayed for each other. They listened to each other's stories and they allowed themselves to be vulnerable with each other. They came to know the divine image of God in each other, so when it became time to talk about the hard stuff, they had already developed a level of trust and mutual respect on which civil discourse depends. When they disagreed, it was not with the purpose of defeating an enemy but instead with the purpose of hearing and learning from their differences.

Christians are called to the ministry of reconciliation. Let's start by remembering what it means to follow Jesus. Let's start by learning how to be friends with one another and then maybe we can learn to love one another as God has loved us.

Questions to consider:

1. Civility and mutual respect are very difficult goals to achieve on deeply divisive topics. What is it about relationships that make those goals both harder to reach and more achievable?

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<sup>2</sup> Preaching peace.org/yearb.easter6.htm.

2. Think about your own friendships. What is it about them that makes them especially important to you? What makes them difficult to sustain? How expansive are they? What makes you a friend to others?
3. What do you think Jesus meant when, in John, he told the disciples that there were no longer servants but friends? What are the practices that shape and sustain friendship with God?