

Civility AND THE Road Less Traveled

Daniel de Roulet

In the various arenas of our life, we strive to be productive, to be responsible, to do the right thing, but in the midst of the demands of daily living, have we lost sight of how we treat each other, how we interact with those who disagree with us, how we understand our place in community? This month the *Companion* introduces a new series on civility, and why it matters to our society and to us as Christians.

SOME MONTHS AGO, two of my sons and I visited the small town where I spent my adolescence. It is, as my oldest son likes to say, an hour from the middle of nowhere, and getting there is a progressive course in stress reduction: from freeway construction, traffic jams, and exhaust fumes, to four-lane roads and the rumbling of long-distance trucks, and finally to the open desert, two-lane highways, and the clean, cold winter wind. As the miles pass, and as we leave “civilization” behind, my mind and body quiet down, and I feel the presence of Jesus.

My sons and I were on a mission: driver’s licenses. In a response to the economy, the California state government has furloughed many of its employees, and the only place

within 200 miles where we could get appointments within a month was my old hometown. So off we went.

Upon our arrival, we stopped at the civic center building for directions to the DMV. A retired man sitting at the front desk said, “Well, we can do this one of two ways. Do you prefer directions or landmarks?”

“I think I’m safer with landmarks.”

“Good,” he said. “It used to be just a stone’s throw from here, but it moved to the other side of town. Do you know where the Sizzler is?”

“Been there many times.”

“All right, then,” he said. It’s just north of the Sizzler. Could be the second street on the left, but it might look like a driveway. Just follow it into the DMV—the building has an awning on the front.”

“Say,” he continued, “do you have time for a story?”

When we arrived at the DMV—a room about two or three times the size of an average living room, two people behind the desk greeted us and, when I said we were here for two behind-the-wheel exams, one of them said, “You must be the de Roulets! 2:00 and 2:30!”

After getting over the initial culture shock of this kind of a DMV experience, I began to settle in. During the next hour, as my sons took their exams, I conversed with the staff and with strangers who happened to come in the door. One of the workers wanted to make sure that I had been helped. The examiner wrote “Good job!” on the bottom of the score sheet of my son who was most nervous. We then went out for celebratory pizza.

As retired humor columnist Dave Barry used to write, “I am not making this up.” Throughout the day, we were treated nicely, as individuals. It didn’t matter if we were Republicans or Democrats, small-town locals or big-city dwellers from “down below,” as the people there call Los Angelinos. We were all just people; they had time for us, and we moved out of our typically rushed modes to make time for them.

I know that this “postcard” I have drawn is not the extent of small-town



life, and we have seen many and regular examples of good behavior in the city, but my sons reacted to our trip with initial bemusement and eventual curiosity. We had driven three hours from civilization and had found civility.

And then, we drove home, and in a week or so forgot how we felt and accepted the behavior around us: road rage, lack of eye contact or hellos in public, that constant feeling of being behind in our schedules. Everything went back to normal.

It is generally accepted that the symptoms, not the disease, drive the patient to the doctor. But what happens when the patient goes on for months or years viewing the symptoms that point to a serious disease as simply being part of a normal life? My claim is that we, in almost all aspects of life, are rapidly losing what it means to act with civility, and that although we recognize the symptoms, we have great difficulty defining what we have lost and acknowledging the danger of its absence. We have even

come to the point where we celebrate the lack of civility as the proper way to respond to other human beings.

Even Wikipedia, that publicly built online encyclopedia, which claims civility as one of its “five pillars,” initially defines the word in the negative: “Incivility consists of personal attacks, rudeness, and aggressive behaviors that disrupt the project

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and lead to unproductive stress and conflict. Editors are human, capable of mistakes, so a few minor incidents of incivility are not in themselves a major concern. A behavioral pattern of incivility is disruptive and unacceptable, and may result in blocks if it rises to the level of harassment or egregious personal attacks. A single act of incivility can also cross the line if it is severe enough: for instance, extreme verbal abuse or profanity directed at another contributor, or a threat against another person can all result in blocks without consideration of a pattern.”

The editors of Wikipedia can tell us what civil behavior is not, but even so they can only define civility by degrees of incivility. Who may draw that line in the sand that a “single act of incivility can also cross”? It is as if, when asked to define civility, the editors write, “Well, it certainly is not that.”

Tucked, though, into the definition of incivility is a comparative stab at—a reference to—civility: “The term civility refers to behavior between persons and groups that conforms to a social mode (that is, in accordance with the civil society), as itself being a foundational principle of society and law. Generally, civility is a social virtue that involves self-control or moderation and contrasts with pride, insolence, and arrogance.... Civic virtue has historically been taught as a matter of chief concern in nations under republican forms of government, and societies with cities. When final decisions on public matters are made by a monarch, it is the monarch’s virtues which influence those decisions. When a broader class of people becomes the decision makers, it is then their virtues which characterize the types of decisions made.”

So civility is an expected code of social behavior. In democracies, or in

republics, as opposed to monarchies or oligarchies, civility is only as good as the values or virtues of its citizens and representatives. This definition still does not tell us how civil we should be; it tells us how civil we are.

Why is this absence of a positive definition, a role model for civility, important?

Practically, it is important because human behavior seems to imitate the lowest common denominator—or at least the values of the strong over the weak. History teaches us that.

Theologically, it is important because the heart of the Old Testament is the Torah, the social code

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know as the Law, and because Jesus spends most of his teaching deepening our understanding of that Law and giving us examples of it in social realities. “Love thy neighbor” is played out in the story of the Good Samaritan, who saves the life and supports the recovery of someone who, because of their cultural differences, likely would have hated him. “You shall have no other God before me” is illustrated in the parable of the tenants who, when God comes back to claim what is his, insist that they are now the owners of his vineyard. And Paul, John, and James spend much of their writing drawing up a code of civility—of expected social behavior—for individual Christians and for our first churches. Without taking these positive definitions seriously, we can find ourselves affirming Christian thoughts, but practicing their horrific opposites. We can accept the label Christian and consistently violate the Christian social code—and we may think ourselves justified in doing so.

If that idea sounds frightening, it should be. Who we are and what we do—not what we think—is our

Christian witness to the world. We should be concerned when our society, labeled fairly or unfairly by most of the rest of the world as a “Christian society,” becomes a negative witness to civility. Although we know we should be doing better, we all struggle and would like a little help with civility, in the following areas:

- In popular culture (where recent cultural trends can help explain the current crisis of civility, as cultural developments in the past fifty years have shaped us in ways of which we may not even be aware)

- In the workplace (where the contradictions and pressures of the desire for success and base human emotions often work against civility)

- Day-to-day in the public sphere (where we are called to actions of civility, little and big, in our daily lives outside the home)

- In the political sphere (where the loss of civility has led to warring parties and factions who tend to focus on winning rather than serving)

- In online communities (a growing problem, in which we can assume identities or be uncivil to those whom we will never see or speak with)

- In our churches (where we are called to be models of Christian civility and to practice it on each other)

- In the media (from cable news to reality shows, where it seems that the less civil the display, the more we gobble it up)

- In caring for the earth (where we have forgotten our original job descriptions as the tenders of God’s garden)

- In our homes (where the civility between husband and wife, between parents and children, between siblings serves as a base for public demonstrations of civility)

- With our enemies and our friends (given that love for our enemies does not seem high on Chris-

tians' things-to-do lists right now, and given the reported absence of meaningful friendships among a high percentage of the population)

In this series, the *Companion* will draw on the experiences of experts and practitioners to define and unpack in practical terms civility in these areas. We expect to be challenged and surprised, and we expect to be reminded of what we have forgotten.

History and the present day give us people, both within and without our faith, who serve as exemplars of civility. Many of these based their philosophies and actions on the teaching of Jesus: someone who profoundly pushed the boundaries of God's expectations for human life and society, and someone who modeled human action in moments of the completely ordinary. He touched those considered untouchable and sought out those caught up in their own sins. But he is also a model of civility in two senses.

The first is forgiveness. In her essay on forgiveness in *Plan B*, Anne Lamott begins, "I used to say that I wasn't one of those Christians who are into forgiveness. I'm the other kind." Then Lamott of course goes on to describe how God did not allow her to be the other kind of Christian—and in fact she learns that there is no "other kind." For Lamott, her journey begins by forgiving a minor enemy, so to speak, citing C. S. Lewis's observation that when attempting forgiveness, one might want to begin with something a little less ambitious than the Nazis.

But the life of Jesus shows a different pattern, one that we need to consider in our climate of growing incivility. Jesus instructs us not just to forgive but to "love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you." It is very difficult to truly love someone whom I don't forgive. If I don't forgive, I find myself playing word games with "love"—redefining love as a way

of shielding my lack of forgiveness. And the fruit of my un-forgiveness is jealousy, hostility, a desire to harm, a desire for revenge. Just think of the range of people Jesus had to forgive: the Romans, who occupied his land and often cruelly oppressed his people; his family, who at one point came to take him away because they thought he had lost his mind; his hometown neighbors, who believed he had come to think too much of himself; a whole host of ordinary people, whose full list of sins he knew; and observant Jews who had confused God's laws with human preferences and traditions and who were actually keeping people from the kingdom of heaven. And he forgives me.

Jesus was sinless and forgave. We have no good excuse not to forgive, sinning just as greatly as anyone around us, and being forgiven although we don't deserve it. One of my resolutions this year is blanket forgiveness—recognizing that everyone, including myself, is a mess, and remembering to forgive as God forgives. I'm even trying to forgive myself. From such forgiveness comes the promise of compassion and love. It does not give me permission to have an enemy list of sinners. "For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15, TNIV). Forgiveness without a change of behavior is a lot like claiming to love while speaking hateful words.

Jesus, like those I encountered in my trip to my high-school hometown but more so, took time. An unexpected demand of time is perhaps the most precious commodity in our society, and it expresses love and civility often more than money, or a quick word, or a carefully planned schedule. In remembering my sense of slowing down when I left the demands of my urban life for a day, I

think of what little time Jesus had to accomplish all he had to accomplish. And yet he interrupted his "schedule" to hear and care for the forgotten, such as the woman at the well. He took time to explain spiritual truths to those who were more interested in bread or to those who considered themselves his enemy. He healed an "untouchable woman" on the way to visiting a dying child, and he patiently explained to his disciples again and again subjects that he may have hoped they would have understood the first (or second, or third) time. And, occasionally, he sat down among a group of fishermen or tax collectors or ordinary people who were seeking more out of life, and like the retired fellow at the desk at the civic center in my hometown, asked, "Do you have time for a story?"

When my sons passed their driving tests, it marked (as any parent knows) a time of celebration and anxiety. Learning to drive is a long, perilous process of attentiveness, muscle memory—and prayer. It includes that which we must think about, that which we must react to because we don't have time to think, and the realization that many of the perils and pleasures of the road are beyond our control.

Civility is an exercise in navigating our inner lives, our lives with each other, and our lives with God. At those times when we must just react, we hope that what comes out of our hearts (and mouths) honors Jesus and is consistent with his teaching. We realize also that in being intentionally part of the vine, we trust Jesus to produce fruit. But the hard work of learning to practice civility with each other is where others will most likely see our Christian witness, and through that witness, for better or for worse, they will decide the worth of what we profess. ■