

Who Are the People in Your Neighborhood?

Practicing Civility in Our Daily Encounters

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I'm a pretty quiet person, but in my first apartment I used to get yelled at for talking too loudly on the phone. I was living in a studio on the fourteenth floor of a high rise in Chicago, where I had taken a job some distance from family and friends. I loved my little place and my newly independent life, but I only interacted with one of my neighbors. She had lived in the apartment next-door to mine for several decades, and her demeanor indicated the ownership she felt for the place.

She could overhear my phone conversations through our open windows, and she seemed to delight in knocking on the door every time my phone rang to remonstrate me about the noise. I found myself reduced to whispers when friends called, hoping to avoid those confrontations.

My neighbor and I never even learned each other's names. We greeted each other on the elevator with polite nods, but neither of us made an effort to cultivate a genuinely civil relationship with the other.

As we continue to explore the “less traveled” path of civility, this month we examine ways to deepen how we practice civility in our local communities. It is now many years since I lived in that isolated apartment, and it is tempting to claim that I have finessed my ability to live well with my neighbors because currently no one is complaining about how loudly my voice carries. But in truth, our call to civility is ongoing and must move beyond the absence of overt conflict. As Christians we have a holy calling to foster genuine, open relationships with those in our community.

The exchange between Jesus and a self-congratulatory lawyer in Luke 10 offers useful instruction in understanding this call to love our neighbors. When Jesus tells the man he must love God and love his neighbor in order to inherit eternal life, the man tries to cut corners. “Who exactly is my neighbor?” he asks. In case we miss his defensive tone, Luke explains that the question was an attempt to justify himself.

Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan—a story that we have heard dozens if not hundreds of times. It is a story that reveals the entire gamut of civil behavior and culminates with a portrayal of compassion and charity that goes far beyond the lawyer’s minimum standards. We encounter lessons about daily civility here—an imperative to move past the polite veneer we often equate with civility, the importance of slowing down, and the need to take relational risks in order to move into human connections that are more profound than the superficial encounters that make up so much of our lives.

We begin our consideration of civility in everyday life with a minimum expectation of politeness. “Practice random acts of kindness” the bumper stickers say. The film *Pay It Forward* popularized its title in our vernacular about ten years ago.

In that movie a twelve-year-old boy named Trevor takes on an extra credit assignment from his jaundiced social studies teacher to create a project that will change the world through direct action. Trevor proposes that instead of repaying good deeds, recipients should pay them *forward* by doing kind things for three other people, producing a sort of snowball effect that will extend the influence of the original act. To start the project Trevor sneaks a homeless man into the apartment he shares with his mother, hoping to help the man turn his life around. Although that effort ostensibly fails, the homeless man takes on the spirit of the project, and Trevor’s project eventually becomes a success beyond anything even he has imagined.

The film reminds us that acts of kindness can generate civility. Helping a young mother unload her grocery cart in the parking lot or buying coffee for the man behind us in line may inspire each of them to go out and do likewise. Clearly in our daily encounters, we must at least follow the guidelines of the golden rule and the lists we learned in kindergarten: Treat others the way you’d like to be treated. Be polite. Respect others’ opinions. Take care with people’s things. Apologize. Be thankful. Speak carefully.

But limiting our conversation about civility in daily life to popular aphorisms fails to fully consider our invitation as Christians to cultivate this virtue. For Christians civility is more than simply being nice. Rather, civility reflects kindness that comes from the heart, it is an open hand, it is genuine hospitality. As believers in Jesus Christ, we become civil because of relationship—we are deeply loved and therefore we in faith can go out and love others.

The Apostle Paul depicts a wholly welcoming community of faith in Ephesians 2. This passage describes

how all believers—both Jews and Gentiles—are joined together in Christ Jesus, “who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (v. 14, TNIV). Paul goes on to exclaim, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (v. 19).

In God’s church we are joined together, with the divisions between us not just reduced but utterly

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destroyed. As members of God’s household, we are transformed and thus empowered and emboldened to live in the world as renewed and regenerated people. Sharing a dual citizenship in both heaven and here on earth, we live fully engaged in both kingdoms, all for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having submitted to God’s renewing movement upon our lives, we participate in God’s holy body, the church, while at the same time living out our calling in the public sphere. As citizens of God’s kingdom we *become* civil toward our fellow citizens, rather than just *behaving* civilly.

So how do we become truly civil Christian people in our daily interactions?

Civility takes time

First, we can slow down. I am much more likely to stop to let the group of teenagers amble across the street in

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front of me when I am not already fifteen minutes late to my appointment. My inclination to cut off the driver who is trying to ease into my lane is remarkably reduced when I haven't spent my day racing through more activities than any one person should attempt to accomplish in twenty-four hours.

Perhaps cultivating civility means learning to say no more often. Our lives are overfull, jam-packed with responsibilities. Our to-do lists are portable, our email accessible, our phones smart—how can we stop long enough to engage someone whose name is not already on today's agenda? To what extent does our frantic pace exacerbate our inability to treat each other well? Perhaps we maintain our frenetic schedules in a subconscious attempt to avoid our unmet inner longings for lives of meaning and connection. Yet our busyness keeps us in a vicious cycle that prevents us from noticing opportunities for connection when they do appear.

As we decrease our pace, we make time to notice God's presence in the individuals we meet each day. When we have made choices that liberate us from our schedules, we have room to truly and authentically engage with others. Being unhurried allows me to be more human.

Civility takes intentionality

One morning recently I was anxious to get to the office—deadlines were looming, and I hoped to get started on the projects at hand early. But when a neighbor took the time to stop on the sidewalk to chat, I put aside my agenda as we shared stories about the good and bad behaviors of our dogs. It wasn't an especially important conversation in the grand scheme of our lives, but it was a meaningful point of connection. Her neighborly approach

elicited a neighborly response in me. My morning was the better for the human exchange.

It is easy to get lazy about civility. Taking time to greet a colleague in the hallway means I stop what I'm doing for a moment. Making the effort to be civil means approaching people as individuals not instruments to help me work more efficiently.

The more we slide into cavalier inattention to the small behaviors that

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reveal our civility, the less our hearts are ordered toward this virtue. I am constantly reminding my adolescent son to act as if he is a civilized person at the dinner table, with the hope that eventually he will become one. He does not understand why he can't eat at home hunched over his plate or with his entire upper body sprawled across the table. "I'll act civilized when I'm out in public," he promises. I labor to explain how *practicing* good behavior develops our muscle memory. The fact is that what takes effort for him now will eventually become a natural response.

Similarly we engage in practices that make space for God's spirit to form us into godly people who demonstrate civility. In his cultural critique *Life on the Vine*, theologian Philip Kenneson suggests that we cultivate patience in the midst of productivity, gentleness in the face of aggression, faithfulness in the midst of impermanence. In so doing, we order our hearts toward God, opening them to the movement of the Holy Spirit and the fruits which reveal his work within us.

Civility requires humility

Living together can be a challenge. Sometimes we have conflicts or misunderstandings. Sometimes we are petty and small-minded, and we hurt each other's feelings. Sometimes others are unkind or thoughtless or even cruel to us. It is much easier to hope conflicts with acquaintances will melt away and that relational tensions will go back under the carpet where they belong than it is to do the healing work of reconciliation.

Recently I was visiting a friend when her neighbor called and asked if she could come over to the house for a minute. My friend responded graciously and excused herself from our conversation. When she returned she explained that her neighbor had been upset about an interaction between their children. My friend readily took responsibility for her daughter's behavior and talked with her neighbor to resolve the dispute together. Hers was a civil response, and it wasn't just because she is a gracious person. Her ability to enter into a painful confrontation came out of a rooted relationship with her neighbor. They had the foundation to weather conflict, and they both made the effort to honestly work through it.

One way to skirt those painful relational conflicts is to avoid face-to-face relationships altogether. It is easy to isolate ourselves in our homes even while we long for meaningful connection. And while social media tools allow us to develop community with people around the world, they do not demand the hard work of relational give-and-take. It is much easier to control a cyber-friendship—we can simply "de-friend" or ignore the person whom we find annoying. But what if that person lives next door?

Transparency fosters civility

Living well in my community means more than bringing my neighbors cookies at Christmas or cutting the grass next door when I'm in a gener-

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ous mood. It means living with an open hand and heart. We're fond of quoting Robert Frost, quick to agree that "good fences make good neighbors," but it's easy to miss the critique Frost was making. Sometimes in fact, good fences make us into bad neighbors when we hide behind them and keep to ourselves.

A friend of mine lives in a beautiful home in a scenic part of her town. She has an eye for detail and design, and her house is truly lovely. Yet she is hesitant to open it to friends and neighbors the way she'd like to because it is never quite company-ready. There's always one more project to complete, or cleaning she hasn't been able to get to, and she is thus unable to fully participate in the life of her community. Sadly, her home becomes an obstacle to relationship rather than a place where connections can flourish.

I understand her reluctance though. When someone stops by unexpectedly and the unfolded laundry is strewn throughout the living room, I am tempted to stand in the doorway and hold them at bay. A commitment to community and to relationship demands another response. It means inviting my neighbors into my life. It means letting down my guard and letting go of my pride. They see the unpolished parts of me even when I am not proud of them. Living together can be complicated even as we strive for honesty and authenticity. We break each other's tools and our dogs wreck each other's grass, but when we have honest relationship we can let go of our desire for perfection and live with the mess of reality.

The one who showed mercy in Jesus's story did not live next door to the man he assisted on the side of the road. But we can't begin to love our neighbor until we first show civility to the people in our daily lives. Once we allow God's spirit to form us in community, we can embody Christlike compassion in the world. ■