

Let's Disagree! Modeling Civility and Authentic Community

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Ancient Witness: Luke 6:37, 41

There is a comedian, Emo Phillips, who had one of the best religious jokes I've ever heard. I think I might have shared it before, I'm not sure, but it bears repeating. Here it is:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What denomination?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

Sometimes the way that we Christians treat each other is at great odds with our message. As the fourth point of Progressive Christianity says, "that the way we behave toward one another is the fullest expression of what we believe."

Sometimes as members of the church, as followers of Jesus, we don't handle disagreements very well. Part of what makes this joke funny is the unfortunate truth that believers are divided and filled with animosity over a seemingly countless number of issues. We seem to have so many non-negotiable topics with each other.

Sometimes it seems that just about any point of disagreement is a license to write off the other person. They might as well jump off a bridge.

Today I want to talk about how we handle disagreements in congregations. And my basic point is this: a congregation should be a place of healthy, loving disagreement.

There are many unhealthy ways to handle disagreements in a church. One common way is to avoid and sublimate all differences. This would be the "pseudo-community" model where acceptance is conditional upon silence, where discourse never penetrates a calm surface. There is a retreat into a superficial peacefulness.

Another healthy way is the "no holds barred" model where winning comes at the expense of respect and civility. Increasingly, we have seen a rise of this polarization, demonizing and vitriol in our society. It seems to me that this is heightened during our campaign season, this kill-or-be-killed attitude. We need to be reminded what we teach our children: Don't hurt each other.

How then, can a church avoid being “conformed to the ways of the world?” A healthy congregation does not disregard those with a minority view, but neither is it paralyzed by disagreement and is able to move forward and make tough decisions. A healthy congregation will promote open and loving ways of living with differences. People are free to share strong and passionate convictions but in ways that are respectful and not destructive.

Paul wrote, “Speak the truth in love.” And I want you to notice that speaking the truth does not have to come at the expense of loving the other, and loving the other doesn’t mean you have to withhold one’s truth, either. In the Presbyterian tradition there is a saying that “people of good character and principles may differ.” That is, when we differ with someone, we give him or her the benefit of the doubt that they have good character.

So some basic ways of promoting healthy and respectful sharing include: not questioning the motives of another, listening attentively and assuming the best of another’s intentions or faith.

And as Paul wrote, when we do this—when we are tender hearted and kind to each other—forgiving one another—not returning evil for evil—then we become like a “fragrant offering” to God.

It’s been almost 30 years that Scott Peck wrote his classic book called, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*. In it he talked about four stages of how a group of people evolves and develops to achieve a deep level of true community. A congregation needs to grow internally, not just externally. The root must grow down before the plant grows up.

The first stage is *pseudo community* where members pretend to have total harmony with one another and cover up their differences by acting as if the differences don’t exist. The rule is: “We agree only to agree.”

Part of being a pseudo community is that you cannot be yourself, you cannot be honest, and you certainly cannot make mistakes. In another classic book, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about pseudo community in the church:

The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everyone must conceal sin from oneself and the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkable horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy.

True community—communion—is about being honest. The Greek word, *koinonia*, translated as “fellowship” has often become such an empty term, where is originally meant a kind of intimacy, a sharing of faith and convictions, of honesty about struggles.

The second stage is when members start venting disagreements. Peck labels this stage, *chaos*, when people realize that differences simply cannot be ignored. It looks counterproductive but is the first genuine step toward community.

Peck calls the next stage *emptiness*, where people learn to empty themselves of ego factors that prevent true community. This is a difficult step involving lowering defenses and becoming vulnerable and open to change.

Finally, the final stage of *true community* happens when people have respect and empathy with each other. Heated discussions never get sour, and motives are not questioned. Peck writes that some of the characteristics of true community are that people accept and embrace each other, celebrating their differences; they share their vulnerability and express who they truly are; and they resolve conflict with wisdom and grace.

I would add that true community is a place where people *don't try to change each other*. We share who we are without trying to convince. One way to do this is with “I-statements.” An I-statement is when we say, “this is how I see it.” It is not a “this is how it is” statement. It is not a “this is what *you* should think” or “this is *the* answer” statement. It is not absolute but conditional—seasoned with humility.

This is how I try to think of my sermon, by the way—as I-statements. This is not *the* Word of God or *the* answer, but this is always how I see it. And I invite you to consider it and perhaps disagree.

I believe that true community is also *a place where people change and grow*. And when we give up changing each other we actually create an environment for individual spiritual growth.

I would also agree with Peck that true communities *make decisions*. They do not fear controversy or conflict but they embrace it. They recognize that times of disagreement do not need to be harmful or destructive; they can be opportunities for individual and corporate growth.

When this church decided years ago to take a stand on the full equality of our gay and lesbian members, this was a time of controversy and disagreement. It might have been easier to avoid it and not make a decision. But thank goodness this congregation did make a decision, and it was an important step toward spiritual growth for the whole church.

Now it is true that some people were upset and some even left. But a healthy church will not be held hostage or be paralyzed by fear. A healthy congregation will not stifle dialogue, but it will promote open, respectful and loving ways to share disagreements and will make decisions. Furthermore, individuals will respect and honor the decisions made by the group.

The other unhealthy way of dealing with conflict is to make everything personal. We have seen all too often that civility is in short supply in the public sphere today. Honest disagreements have given way to an “us vs. them” mentality.

Jesus, my primary spiritual guide, certainly did not expect his followers to agree with each other or with others, especially those in the seats of power. One can vigorously disagree, in his view, but without demonizing or “going to war” with the other. Disagree? Yes! Condemn? No. “Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned,” he said. Like other great spiritual masters, Jesus offers us a *very* challenging teaching, something to aspire toward but never fully attain.

Several years ago, Jim Wallis, a social justice Christian evangelical, developed “A Covenant for Civility” that many church leaders from different political and theological views have signed. It said,

...we have come together to make this covenant with each other... so that together we can contribute to a more civil national discourse... Too often, however, we have reflected the political divisions of our culture rather than the unity we have in the body of Christ... We pledge to God and to each other that we will lead by example in a country where civil discourse seems to have broken down.

And so the idea here is that as the church, we let the change we call for begin with us! For example, the pledge says,

We pledge that when we disagree, we will do so respectfully, without impugning the other's motives, attacking the other's character, or questioning the other's faith, and recognizing in humility that in our limited, human opinions, "we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

You'll notice that for the Call to Worship this morning I used Isaiah's great vision of the Holy Mountain of God where we see the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the cow and the bear feeding together and the nursing child playing over the hole of the snake.

And I want you to notice that this is not a superficial *blend of similarities* but a *harmony of opposites*. Over 100 years ago, G. K. Chesterton wrote that it is not a matter of the lion becoming lamblike and forsaking its essential identity. Rather, it is a matter of very different creatures living together without trying to hurt or destroy the other, the miracle of peaceful co-existence.

And so I pray for true community, on earth as in heaven,
where the lion lies down with the lamb,
where the hawks and the doves fly together,
where the liberals and conservatives, capitalists and socialists, respect each other,
where we make decisions and do not undermine a fair process,
where there is civility and harmony in spite of differences on God's Holy Mountain.

And may this change begin with us.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)