

MAY 30 2010 MEMORIAL SUNDAY

CIVILITY BEGINS AT HOME

PROVERBS 8:1-4, 22-31; JOHN 16:12-15

“WE HAVE THE ORIGINAL APE IN THE WHITE HOUSE!” THIS IS HOW THE IMPERIOUS GENERALGEORGE MCLELLAN PUBLICLY REFERRED TO HIS COMMANDER IN CHIEF, PRESIDENT ABRAHAM LINCOLN. SOME SAY THAT RIVAL EDWIN STANTON DID THE SAME THING. YET, ALTHOUGH A RIVAL TO LINCOLN AND INSULTING TO HIM, LINCOLN WOULD MAKE HIM A MEMBER OF HIS CABINET.SO YOU CAN SEE, WE DO NOT HAVE A MONOPOLY ON INCIVILITY IN OUR ERA.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON SO DETESTED AARON BURR THAT HE CALLED HIM “A DANGEROUS MAN, YET SOMETHING MORE DESPICABLE”. THEY ENDED UP DUELING AND HAMILTON WAS KILLED. MANY HISTORIANS BELIEVE THAT ANDREW JACKSON’S WIFE, RACHEL, DIED OF A HEART ATTACK AS A RESULT OF THE VILE ATTACKS ON HER CHARACTER DURING THE ELECTION OF THE 1820’S. IN THE 1860’S SEN. SUMNER WAS BRUTALLY BEATEN WITH A CANE BY SENATOR BROOKS. FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT WAS BELITTLED BY HIS OPPONENTS. THEY SAID THAT HIS BRAIN WAS AS WEAK AS HIS LEGS. ROOSEVELT HAD POLIO. I AM EMBARRASSED TO SAY THAT IN MY CRAZY YOUTH I SHOUTED WITH REST: “HEY, HEY LBJ, HOW MANY KIDS DID YOU KILL TODAY?”

INCIVILITY IS NOTHING NEW TO AMERICA. I DON’T REMEMBER A SITTING PRESIDENT, SINCE EISENHOWER, THAT HAS NOT BEEN PUBLICLY MALIGNED. THE ASSAULT ON OUR ELECTED OFFICIALS HAS REACHED FEVER PITCH FUELED BY THE EXTREMES ALWAYS FAVORED BY THE MEDIA. THE NEWS HAS A CLICHÉ: “IF IT BLEEDS, IT READS” REFERRING TO SENSATIONALISM AS THE KEY TO VIEWERSHIP RESULTING IN MORE MONEY FROM SPONSORS. HARSH OPINIONS AND EMOTIONAL TIRADES RULE! DIALOGUE AND SUBTLE THINKING ABOUT COMPLEX ISSUES DOES NOT PLAY WELL IN THE 24 HOUR NEWS CYCLE. WE MUST NOT BORE THE AMERICAN PUBLIC WITH RATIONAL DIALOGUE!

YES, WE ALWAYS HAVE HAD INCIVILITY, BUT HAS IT BEEN GOOD FOR AMERICA? THE QUESTION IS: HAS IT EVER SOLVE D ANYTHING? OR HAS IT ALWAYS BEEN A DISTRACTION FROM MEANINGFUL SOLUTIONS FOR ALL THE PEOPLE.

QUIETLY AND CONTINUALLY, THINKING CHRISTIAN LEADERS, LEFT, RIGHT, AND IN THE MIDDLE, THINKING CONSERVATIVE AND PROGRESSIVE

CHRISTIANS, HAVE BEEN JOINING TOGETHER TO ADVOCATE FOR CIVILITY. RICHARD MOUW, THE EVANGELICAL PRESIDENT OF FULLER SEMINARY HAS SAID THAT THE CHURCH IS THE ONLY PLACE THAT MAY INFLUENCE THE RESTORATION OF CIVILITY IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE.

MARTIN MARTY, A MORE PROGRESSIVE LUTHERAN, ONCE WROTE THAT PEOPLE WHO HAVE STRONG CONVICTIONS ARE OFTEN NOT VERY CIVIL, AND PEOPLE WHO ARE CIVIL OFTEN DO NOT HAVE STRONG CONVICTIONS. WHAT WE NEED, HE SAID, IS CONVICTED CIVILITY. .. MOUW WRITES IN NEWSWEEK, “OUR BELIEF SYSTEMS ARE VERY DIFFERENT ON SOME MATTERS THAT ARE OF FUNDAMENTAL SIGNIFICANCE. WE NEED TO TALK TOGETHER--YES, AND ARGUE PASSIONATELY WITH EACH OTHER. BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO FIND WAYS OF DOING SO THAT WILL ALSO ALLOW US TO WORK TOGETHER FOR THE COMMON GOOD.”

THIS IS IMPORTANT TO THINK ABOUT, FOR WITH ALL THE “GOD RHETORIC” THROWN ABOUT IN THE LAST 30 YEARS—THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH HAS NOT MADE MUCH OF AN IMPACT ON THE CULTURE AT LARGE. THE SECULAR MEDIA, THE ENTERTAINMENT EMPIRES, FOR EXAMPLE, NOW RUN THE SHOW AND PROMOTE THEIR VALUES WHICH ESSENTIALLY RUN THE GAMUT OF AMORAL TO IMMORAL. CHRISTIAN VALUES OF LOVE, PEACE, KINDNESS, JUSTICE, HOLINESS, EQUALITY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE ARE RENDERED USELESS, SOMETIMES MOCKED. WHEN CHRISTIANS FINALLY GET A VOICE, IT IS OFTEN THE EXTREMISTS ON THE RIGHT AND LEFT WHO HAVE HIJACKED RELIGIOUS AND BIBLICAL LANGUAGE FOR THEIR OWN POLITICAL PURPOSES OR SOMEONE WHO HAS FALLEN FROM GRACE. ANGER AND SIN SELLS.

I BLAME MYSELF; I BLAME US. WE HAVE BECOME SPECTATORS WHO JUST PARROT OPINIONS WE COBBLE TOGETHER FROM THE MEDIA. THE MEDIA, WHICH NEVER TELLS THE COMPLETE STORY, FORMS OUR WORLD VIEW. IT WAS SLOW AT FIRST, BUT IT HAS BECOME INSIDIOUS. HOW MUCH OF OUR VIEWPOINTS ARE DICTATED BY THE MEDIA RATHER THAN MOLDED BY OUR FAITH? I DON'T THINK WE STOP OURSELVES MUCH AND RUN WHAT WE THINK AND BELIEVE POLITICALLY AND CULTURALLY AGAINST THE GUIDING WORDS AND DEEDS OF JESUS. FAITH-FORMED VIEWPOINTS ARE LOSING GROUND.

IS IT TIME FOR US TO BECOME THE VOICE OF CIVILITY? THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE HAVE TO GIVE UP WHAT WE STAND FOR, BUT IT DOES MEAN THAT IN A DEMOCRACY WE MUST COMPROMISE THE BEST WE CAN. I

WAS PLEASED TO SEE THAT OUR CANDIDATES FOR THE SENATE, SESTAK AND TOOMEY, HAVE AGREED TO BE CIVIL TO EACH OTHER AND JUST DEBATE THE ISSUES AND LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE ON THOSE MERITS. WHAT A NOVEL IDEA! (JUST JOKING). I HOPE IT WORKS OUT.

THERE IS TOO MUCH FEAR AND ANIMOSITY IN OUR CULTURE RIGHT NOW. IT IS BEING COMPOUNDED BY ACTUAL TERRIBLE, STRESSFUL EVENTS SUCH AS THE OIL SPILL, CONTINUED TERRORISTIC THREAT, AND PROLONGED WARS. ONLY THE CHURCH CAN RELIEVE SOME OF THE FEAR AND RESTORE FAITH. CIVILITY BEGINS AT HOME. THE TONE OF OUR NATIONAL DIALOGUES MUST BE BROUGHT DOWN A FEW NOTCHES. WE WHO CLAIM TO APPEAL TO CHRIST'S LOVE, MUST BECOME MORE INFLUENTIAL IN THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE.

MOUW SHOWS HOW AND WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT ONLY BE PEOPLE OF CONVICTION, BUT PEOPLE OF COMPASSION AND CIVILITY. WE ARE, HE REMINDS US, TO "PURSUE PEACE WITH EVERYONE" (HEBREWS 12:14), AND TO "SHOW EVERY COURTESY TO EVERYONE" (TITUS 3:2). CIVILITY DOES NOT MEAN WE HAVE TO LIKE EVERYONE WE MEET, FORFEIT OUR CONVICTIONS TO A RELATIVISTIC PERSPECTIVE, OR BEFRIEND PEOPLE AS A MANIPULATIVE PLOY TO EVANGELIZE THEM. RATHER, IT MEANS CARING DEEPLY ABOUT OUR ...PUBLIC LIFE, BECAUSE GOD SO CARES... HE CAUTIONS AGAINST OUR TENDENCIES TO TRIUMPHALISM, AND TRYING TO USHER IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD RIGHT NOW, AS OPPOSED TO APPRECIATING THE WAYS AND MEANS OF A PATIENT, SLOW-MOVING GOD WHO LOVES HIS CREATION DEEPLY AND LONGS TO REDEEM IT.

AS THIS IS MEMORIAL WEEKEND, AS AN EFFORT TO REMEMBER THOSE WHO FOUGHT AND PASSED ON AND SUPPORT THOSE WHOM DEFEND US STILL, I WOULD END WITH THIS THOUGHT. I WAS THERE WHEN MY DEAR FRIENDS CAME BACK FROM VIETNAM AND SOME WERE EXTREMELY UNCIVIL AND DISRESPECTFUL TO THEM. IT WAS SO UNAPPRECIATIVE AND HURTFUL, PERHAPS, DESPICABLE.

YET, SAD THAT IT HAD TO HAVE HAPPENED, AMERICA APPARENTLY LEARNED SOMETHING FROM THAT. WE CAN DISAGREE ON THE POLITICS OF WAR, BUT MOST AMERICANS CAN NOW DO SO WITHOUT INCIVILITY TOWARDS OUR TROOPS. IF WE LEARNED THAT LESSON, CAN'T WE ALSO LEARN TO BE MORE CIVIL TO ONE ANOTHER? AMEN.

