

DEMONSTRATE CHARITY

12:21 Series (Part 4) | Romans 12:9, 14-20

After the Backyard Brawl

I doubt the name, Finley Peter Dunne, is known to most of us, though in the year 1905 he was featured in VANITY FAIR magazine as one of the most influential voices of his time. Dunne was an Irish-American journalist from Chicago, whose political commentary and sketches were regarded as so wise or witty that President Teddy Roosevelt often had them read at White House cabinet meetings. It was this native Chicagoan who famously observed that **"Politics Ain't Beanbag."** It's not like one of those friendly games of bag-toss we play with our neighbors in our backyards and then sit down happily to a meal together. Politics is a rough-and-tumble contest that leaves people bruised and bloodied and far apart from one another.

While the famous Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, is often credited with it, it was actually Finley Peter Dunne who also first quipped that **"All Politics is Local."** By that he meant that campaigns may play out on a national stage, but it's here in our local communities where the truth and consequences of political struggles are rooted and take shape. It's in families, churches, workplaces and neighborhoods where the impact and outcome of campaigns are most acutely felt.

I don't need to convince you that there's a lot of FEELING in our community right now. We are in the early aftermath of one of the most brutal and bloody of backyard brawls. And, for some of us, the question looms: Where do we go from here? And, whether we feel like we've won or lost, or whether we feel hope for our country right now or deep concern, what does our faith suggest we do in these times?

Love Must Be Sincere

The full answer to that question will be even clearer after the final message in this series next week when we talk about what it means to keep serving the Lord by being: **Joyful in hope, patient in affliction, [and] faithful in prayer (Rom 12:12).** I pray you can join us for that final installment. Today, I want to lift up one further crucial commitment for Christians in conflicted times. In the 12th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, the Apostle has effectively said to the Church: Do Not Be Conformed to the pattern of this world, Value Everyone, and Pursue the Common Good. In our lesson for today, Paul calls Christians to Demonstrate Charity in the way we treat people around us – especially those with whom we disagree.

Now, when I say the word, "CHARITY," I recognize that it can bring to mind a sort of condescending, nominal consideration towards needy people. As in, "Be nice to those

people who voted for the wrong candidate; it's not their fault that they are so mentally under-resourced." That's not what I mean when I say "Demonstrate Charity," and definitely not what that word originally meant. "Charity" is the word the King James Version of the Bible uses to translate the Greek word "*agapé*," which most properly means a Jesus-like LOVE.

In his letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul gives us a particularly famous description of CHARITY, when he says: **[Charity] suffers long and is kind; [it] does not envy; does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; [Charity] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [It] never fails. (1 Cor 13:4-8, NKJV)**

How many of you had that passage read at your wedding service or have heard it read at somebody else's? How many of you got married having barely a clue about how hard it was going to be to actually live that way, once you were joined in holy deadlock (wedlock) with another imperfect human being? I plead guilty and Amy would too. Paul, however is not at all naïve about how difficult loving like Jesus loves truly is. This realism is why Paul gets even more pointed in his letter to the Romans about what charity really looks like. He warns the Roman Christians that their **Love [CHARITY] must be sincere (*anupokritos*) (Rom 12:9).**

Now, the word translated "sincere" there is the Greek term "*anu-pah-kri-tas*" which literally means "without hypocrisy." It come from the underlying Greek word, *hypokrites*, which is the term the Greeks used to describe a stage actor. Paul is literally saying here: "Christians, don't just play act" at love. If the Christian witness is going to make an impact on this world, then our Charity must be real. It must be at a level that people are not accustomed to seeing. It must look like the way that Jesus loves.

Next to relating to someone else in a marriage, I can't think of another crucible better suited to melt our pride and grow our capacity for a more Jesus-like charity than relating to someone with whom we disagree politically. The good news is that – if not this week -- you're going to have the chance to be in that crucible soon. Thanksgiving is coming and some of us are going to be at a table with family members who won't see eye-to-eye with us about the state of our country at this point.

Parenthetically, I've just learned that the Governor of California has declared that Thanksgiving gatherings must be limited to no more than six persons, while funerals will be allowed to accommodate up to thirty. My friend, Mike Woodruff, suggests that maybe some Californians should send out notices alerting friends and family that they are scheduling a funeral for their pet turkey on Thursday, Nov. 26th, but that refreshments will be served. What strange times we are in!

Ways to Demonstrate Charity

Regardless of whether it is at Thanksgiving or during this week ahead, let me touch on four specific ways that you and I can try to DEMONSTRATE CHARITY in a way that might help the Christian community to be something of the salt and light that Jesus calls us to be in our time.

FIRST of all: Speak words of good-will toward those on the other side. As many of you know, I grew up in a political home. My dad served in the New York State Legislature as a Republican and in the Connecticut State Senate as a Democrat. I saw him win a lot of elections and I also saw him lose a few. I don't remember a single one of his victory speeches. I will never forget his concession speeches. One of the most impressive things he taught me about leadership, was how to be courageously gracious when you lose. In 1976, he lost an election to the U.S. Congress to a man I knew to be dishonest. He would eventually be thrown out of Congress when his deceit was discovered. During the campaign, this man had propagated terrible lies about my dad.

But my father refused to respond in kind. In his concession speech on that election night, my Dad expressed good-will toward his opponent. He wished him and his family every success as they served the people of the district. My father was hurt. He knew injustices had been done. But, he was guided by his Christian faith, the example of Jesus, and the call of God's Word: **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Do not repay anyone evil for evil (Rom 12:14, 17).**

The biblical definition of "love" (charity) has nothing to do with feelings. As Dallas Willard often reminded us, *to love is to will the good of the other*. You may not have warm fuzzy feelings toward those on the other side of the many divides of our time. But, as Christians, we need to keep speaking words of good-will toward them. We need to make it clear that while we may earnestly differ with their convictions, like Jesus, we want the best for them. As I said last week, we yearn to see good for all.

Then, SECONDLY: Think about how you come across to others. Think about the attitudes you hold or the words that come out of your mouth get communicated in emails and social media, subsequent to this election. Over the past few decades, many of us have grown very hard and hostile toward people who look at life differently than we do. In 1997, the year I came to Christ Church, 64% of Americans surveyed expressed confidence in each other's ability to make wise political choices. Today, only 34% do.¹ A recent study by the Cato Institute found that 62% of Americans say they are afraid to share their political views with other.²

Is it any wonder? Do you hear the acrimony with which people speak these days? Have you thought about the role that social media plays in all of this? A few months ago, I watched a documentary on Netflix called, THE SOCIAL DILEMMA. If you have not watched that yourself, I encourage you to do so this week. The documentary is

made by and features many of the people who invented social media – and are now looking back with horror at the monster they unintentionally released.

In the days ahead, I hope you and I can think more carefully about how our attitude and actions and words come across to others and either fuels the flames of enmity or pours the living waters of God's Holy Spirit on those flames. Does the way I communicate help build bridges with other people? Does it make them more likely to share their hurts and hopes with me? Does it increase the likelihood that they will look to me as a partner in the pursuit of the Common Good, even when we might have different views of how we get there? The Apostle Paul says: **Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Rom 12:18).**

Let me just say that I don't think mere CIVILITY is going to be enough. I don't think that just getting more polite (which is not a bad start) is going to be sufficient to bridge the chasms now between us. As God himself demonstrated in his decision to enter human flesh, CHARITY requires trying to enter into the point of view that others have. For example, if we hope to find PEACE even between people in the Christian Church, then we probably need to understand better why a lot of conscientious believers looked at the candidates and choices in the recent election differently than we did. If you want to take a step in this direction, you might go to ChristianityToday.com and read the editorial from the day before the election on "Why Evangelicals Disagree on the President."³ You don't have to land where the CEO of CT does, but it will be helpful to understand why even some of our own Christian brothers and sisters feel the way they do. If we can't find peace in the Church, how will it happen elsewhere?

THIRDLY, I think it could help to Don't be consumed by anger. A lot of us are angry right now. Not all anger is bad; it can be the appropriate response to injustice. But the Apostle Paul tells us that in our anger we should not sin (Eph 4:26). We should not let our hurt or pride run away with us, so that we take on the role of judge and punisher. **Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord (Rom 12:19)**

Back when I was in seminary, I read a remark by the Presbyterian pastor and author, Frederick Buechner, that I re-read often when I am enraged by someone or when one of the Blue or Red Channels is getting me all whipped up: "*Of the Seven Deadly Sins,*" writes Buechner, "*anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.*" Sometimes we have to forgive other people, or release the need to fix or

flagellate them, because we trust in God's justice. And sometimes, we need to let go, because by the end of our days we want to still have a soul and not just a skeleton.

Time has run away, so let me send us out with one FINAL instruction, as it's found at the end of Romans 12. **On the contrary...** writes Paul. In other words, rather than further hardening yourself against those on the other side... **If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head (Rom 12:20).**

The way forward for our society is for all of us to understand more deeply the root hungers and thirsts – the deep desires and needs – that are driving the sometimes utterly disfigured and sometimes beautifully expressive behaviors of others. If we don't address the deepest needs of people, they will continue to surface in good, bad, and ugly ways. When I was an angry young atheist, living a stupidly irresponsible life and lashing out at the world, it was the kindness of a group of Christians that finally got through to me. They looked beneath my dysfunctional behavior and addressed my deeper need for love, for hope, for a way to find flourishing. And I began to change.

The great reformer, John Calvin, says that when Paul describes heaping burning coals on our enemy's head, he isn't talking about torturing him – though we might feel like doing that! Paul, however, is talking about loving people with such CHARITY that it heats up their imagination or softens their hard heads.⁴ So, Let your practical kindness toward people who disagree with you make people think. Have a benevolent influence on your political enemies like those Christians I met had on me, or like Jesus on the Cross has had, I hope, on all of us.

As I said at the start: "Politics ain't beanbag." It is tough stuff. And "all politics is local." It lands in the world of relationships where each of us lives. But this must also be said of Christian discipleship. You and I have been called by none other than Jesus Christ to DEMONSTRATE CHARITY. It's tough stuff and it lands in the world of real relationships. As Romans 12:21 summarizes it, in these important days ahead: **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21).**

Please pray with me...

¹ [Michael Dimock, "How Americans View Trust, Facts & Democracy Today," *PewTrust.org*.](#)

² [Emily Ekins, "Poll: 62% of Americans Say," *Cato.org*, July 22, 2020](#)

³ [Tim Dalrymple, "Why Evangelicals Disagree About the President," *ChristianityToday.com*, November 2, 2020](#)

⁴ *"Either our enemy will be softened by [our] kindness, or, if he is so ferocious that nothing may assuage him, he will be stung and tormented by the testimony of his conscience, which will feel itself overwhelmed by our kindness."* [John Calvin \(translated by John King\), *Commentary on Romans*, Forgotten Books, 2007](#)