Dear Church Family,

Congregant, Reagan Demas, brought us the message this weekend continuing our series on culture by addressing the matter of civility. He addressed three questions for our consideration as believers called to civility in scripture. What does it look like in today’s polarized society to be a Christian and love those with whom we disagree? What does that look like to balance civility with truth? And lastly, what are the spiritual implications of viewing people and their divergent views?

Civility at its root means to be a “member of a household” and to live peacefully within a society. It references respecting others, even if we do not respect their views. For Christians, civility is something more than this. It is the acceptance of the reality of brokenness in the world, and in humankind, not as something which is good, but rather as something which is real. God is in the midst of our brokenness, and wants us to join Him in engaging our broken world. Civility is bringing the abstract to the personal. Civility requires a deeper engagement that loves by addressing, not ignoring, issues of sin and brokenness. In our current cultural environment, however, there is no doubt that civility is being challenged in the public square. There is growing hostility towards people with differing views, including Christian views, even though our US House of Representatives just signed a joint “Commitment to Civility,” stating that “a leader can be cooperative and conciliatory without compromising his or her core principles.”

How did Jesus manage to express disagreement while still showing love and staying “civil”? In John 8:1-11 we see Jesus challenged by the Pharisees with regards to the stoning of a woman caught in adultery. Showing authentic love amidst sin – that is civility. Civility is bringing the abstract to the personal. The abstract is that adultery is a sin, which according to the Mosaic law of the time was punishable by stoning. The personal is that Jesus saw a broken woman who was being judged by others with sin. So, what does this story mean for us today? Jesus does not ignore or water down sin, He abhors sin. Jesus focuses on ALL sin, not just the popular sin of the day, or the easily visible sin. He does not just call out sin, he offers healing and redemption to all who come to Him. Are our appearances in the public square more like Jesus with the adulterer, or the Pharisees? The call to civility is very clear in scripture. James exhorts that “wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” Titus 3:2 says– “Speak evil of no one, avoid quarreling, be gentle, show every courtesy to everyone.” And1 Peter 3:15-16 encourages us to give defense of your beliefs “with gentleness and reverence.”

In the end, civility can be more effective at spreading truth. But it does not make civility easy, it is actually very difficult. Civility requires real, actual, authentic tolerance – not the new “intolerant tolerance” that Stuart referenced as common in our culture today. Civility is not about folding under the pressure of society’s attack on Christianity today. Civility is giving people “the right to be wrong,” while recognizing that it is our duty to persuade, and knowing that God can change hearts through us. Nor does the call to civility mean we should not be “extreme” in our faith. As Christians, we are called to be “extremists” about the right things in an honorable way. Martin Luther King Jr. responded to the accusation of being an extremist this way, “The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”

At its core, the calling to civility is really a call to reject fear. Fear is a powerful emotion. Fear of the unknown, or fear of change, or fear of the different. And fear can fuel the fire of incivility. As Christians, we have a fear that in being civil to people we vehemently disagree with, or allowing them the freedom of expression we are turning a blind eye to sin. Yet, the ability to represent our God, who is truth, is more potent when we model peace and confidence in His unchanging character, than it does when express anger and rage at a shifting culture. Grace and mercy offers a powerful invitation to change, even as God has done that for
us in Jesus Christ. In a culture of contempt, let us embrace a graceful recognition of the potential of personhood. Because being civil does not mean rejecting our faith in Jesus. It just means we’re going to try to act more like Him while we’re sharing truth with others.

May we humble ourselves in prayer, as we seek to express His civility to the world around us.

Father, we know that you have called us to truth and to civility. Help us to show compassion and grace to those who attack us, even as we stand up for You and what we believe.

Thank you for your truth. Thank you for your Son and your word, which give us comfort and assurance as we engage a world hostile to you and your covenant.

Grant us humility and compassion in our discourse in the public square, and the ability to control our emotions in the face of those who denounce you. We are a broken people, unable to love others as ourselves without your help.

Forgive us when we fail to focus on the fundamentals. In a city suffocated by political incivility, keep our eyes on the things closest to your heart.

Give us love for the unlovable, grace for the unforgiveable, and humility in the things we simply know to be true.

Guide us in engaging a world so in need of you.

We pray these things in your son’s name Jesus – Amen.

Lastly, we want to remember those suffering due to the events in Charlottesville. Please continue to be in prayer. Bo addressed this in light of the message on civility which is included at the end of the MP3 if you would like to hear more.