

SELF-SERVICE IS AN OXYMORON¹

Matthew 6: 1-4

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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I have a friend in Charleston, SC named Mitch Carnell. He is a retired professor of speech, and over the years he has become more and more concerned about the rudeness found in much public discussion, especially religious discussion. He recently edited a book entitled *Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*,² to which I contributed a chapter.

I

People have become so used to being snapped at, talked down to, ridiculed, and generally assaulted with rudeness, that an act of simple courtesy can make a huge difference.

The Barna Research organization recently published the results of a study of over 4,000 randomly selected adults that indicated that 61% of un-churched adults think of themselves as Christians.³ In fact, the large majority of them either grew up in the church or were once members of a church, but no longer attend any church. Now here's an interesting number: 37% of those who no longer go to church say that the reason they no longer

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, April 25, 2010.

² Mitch Carnell (ed.), *Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Smyth & Helwys, 2009).

³ See www.barna.org.

participate is that they have been hurt by an experience or a relationship within the church.

Church is composed of all kinds of people, many of whom have strong opinions. It is no surprise that people often have disagreements in church. Even thick-skinned people can get their feelings hurt in church. People go to church wanting to be loved and accepted and appreciated, and they sometimes leave feeling excluded and alienated and not appreciated.

Even pastors have this problem. You have probably heard the old story about the mother who called upstairs and said, "Son, get dressed for church!" And he called back and said, "I'm not going."

"What do you mean you're not going? It's Sunday and you're going to church!"

"No I'm not! Those people don't like me!"

And the mother calls up, "Son, you're getting dressed to go to church!" He calls back, "Why do I have to?" She yells upstairs: "Because you are 42 years old and you are the pastor of the church!"

Some people come into the front door of the church happy and expecting to have a good experience, and they leave through the back door of the church hurt and disillusioned. No amount of good publicity can overcome the bad publicity that hurt people can give. Here is some great news! This

church is not like a yacht club that accepts only those whose boats meet certain standards. This church is like a safe harbor that welcomes all people no matter what their ship of life looks like. It could be creaky and leaking and barely making it into the harbor, but once you moor your boat in this harbor you can know that you are safe!

Some of you here may feel like your boat is barely staying afloat. But today we want to say thank you. Thank you for being here. Thank you for believing in the importance of church. Thank you for investing your time and energy in church even when you know that it is far from perfect. Thank you for your ideas, your smile, your encouragement, your convictions. Thank you!

This is one of those weeks when we recognize and thank people for volunteer work. Can you imagine a church without volunteers? Today we will offer a prayer in litany form for our volunteers.

I like what the Apostle Paul wrote to a church that he especially appreciated: *We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope.*⁴

⁴ I Thessalonians 1: 2-3.

II

Then on Thursday of this past week the nation observed the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day, the largest environmental celebration of the year, and we witnessed hosts of people doing volunteer work to help protect the environment. On Saturday morning we began construction of our own church's organic garden, thanks again to volunteer efforts.

You might consider Earth Day as a time to express appreciation for the earth. The biblical account of creation has God looking at all the creation and pronouncing it good. In some forms of religious thought the created world is considered evil or of no consequence. In biblical faith the earth is the good creation of a gracious God, and our job is to care for it as we care for ourselves.

The biblical word for this is stewardship. A steward in the New Testament is *oikonomos*, from which we get our word "economist." An economist is a person who is charged with caring for our household. This week we are reminded that the earth is our household, and caring for it is part of our stewardship.

So this week we express appreciation to each other and to God for this good earth.

III

Earlier in this service we heard read a small portion of what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is talking about service. He calls it *acts of righteousness*, a term that sounds very biblical, but really refers to volunteer service. He says that when we perform acts of volunteer service, we don't need to announce it with trumpets; rather, we are to do it quietly. We are to just do it because it needs doing. In the memorable words of Jesus, *...do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*

There is a difference between prominence and significance, and Jesus was pointing out that difference very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount.

Prominence seeks the attention of people; significance
seeks to help people.

Prominence seeks publicity; significance seeks change for
good.

Prominence seeks applause; significance seeks action.

Prominence seeks instant gratification; significance seeks
patience with long-term good.

I once read a eulogy written by a grandson in honor of his grandfather, who had been a pastor of small churches all his life. Here is what he said: "My grandfather never accumulated material wealth, pastured a mega church, or

became famous in this life. However, he faithfully started 7 thriving churches over a 62-year span. His descendents include 11 ordained ministers, 4 missionaries, 7 college professors, and 30 teachers.” Here was a grandson who was thankful that his grandfather chose significance over prominence!

Now if you have been around church long, you are fully aware that not all the ways we serve in the church are glamorous. Not every ministry the church conducts is recognized or applauded. Not every good thing we do as a church is prominent. But are we significant? That is the question. Do we make a difference in the life of this city? Do we quietly bring encouragement and hope and confidence for living to people? If we can answer yes to those questions, then it doesn't matter how prominent we are; we are significant!

IV

When we thank volunteers who serve quietly and faithfully, we are actually thanking people for being significant. Jesus said, *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them....* To all the volunteers who serve faithfully in this church: thank you for being significant!