

Session One Handout:

Civil Discourse and Followers of Jesus

Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we come together to meditate and examine your word. Give us ears to hear, hearts to receive, and minds to consider how we might be your hands and feet in the world. Show us your way, O God, that we might know you better. Amen.

Civil Discourse as a Way of Listening and Learning

- **Respect** – Respect each person you meet and take the time to truly consider what they are saying. Respond, don't react. No blaming, shaming or attacking another person.
- **Listen Deeply** – Listen to what each person is saying, focus on the ideas presented, and discuss ideas and issues – not people. No side conversations as they distract from engagement and listening. Do not interrupt while others are speaking.
- **Speak for Yourself** – Use “I” statements when commenting or responding. Share your personal experience.
- **Try to Understand** – Try to understand the thoughts and ideas of others. Ask questions for clarification.
- **Share Talk Time** – Make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak before speaking again. Take notes if there are things you want to follow up on. Ask what others think.
- **Speak respectfully** – When you choose to speak, respect your fellow learners and do not try to be the one that knows everything about the topic at hand.
- **Gratitude** – If someone has shared something or asked a question that helps with your own learning, say thank you.
- **Suspend Judgment** – We all have presumptions, biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and other pre-judgments. Try to suspend these and seek to understand.
- **Disagree, Don't Debate** – We are here to learn and listen. You can disagree with someone and still love them and listen to them. This isn't about who is right, but about listening and learning together.
- **Practice Forgiveness** – We learn from trying things out and sometimes we make mistakes. Seek to forgive and to be forgiven as we learn together.
- **Pay Attention to your Feelings and Thoughts** – If you do not feel safe asking a question or commenting on a topic, write it down and ask someone to help you give voice to it or talk it through. If something hurts your feelings, acknowledge that the comment (not the person) hurt and explain why.

Scripture Reflection

John 13:33-35

³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

Reflection Questions:

- What word or phrases stood out for you?
- If we already had the 10 Commandments and all the other rules in the Bible, I wonder why Jesus felt they had to give them this new commandment.
- When do we find this commandment easy?
- When do we find this commandment difficult?

Followers of Jesus (20 minutes)

We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography—our identity in Christ precedes every other identity. We pray that our nation will see Jesus' words in us. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church's role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government's role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace, rewarding good behavior while restraining bad behavior (Romans 13). When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."

It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them. We do so here with humility, prayer, and a deep dependency on the grace and Holy Spirit of God.

This letter comes from a retreat on Ash Wednesday, 2018. During Lent, we feel deep lamentations for the state of our nation, and our own hearts are filled with confession for the sins we feel called to address. The true meaning of the word repentance is to turn around. It is time to lament, confess, repent, and turn. In times of crisis, the church has historically learned to return to Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

- What stood out for you in listening to this statement?
- For you, I wonder what it means to be a Christian first and everything else second?
- For you, what does it mean that Jesus is Lord? What does that look like in your life?
- How would our fellow citizens know we are Christians by our love?
- What does it mean to commit ourselves as Christians today?

Closing Prayer

Let us pray:

Loving God, we thank you for this time together to ponder the commandments you have given us and how we might live that out in our world today. Help us to commit ourselves as your followers and as your disciples each day. Guide us on our journey from this place that we might know and see your love in those around us, and that we might spread that love to all we encounter. In your name we pray. Amen.