

“A SHORT COURSE IN HUMAN RELATIONS”

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

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The United Methodist Church observes six “Special Sundays” over the course of a year, each one highlighting a particular constituency or concern of our denomination. I would be naïve to think that any of you anticipate these Sundays as you do Epiphany, Easter, or Pentecost. They represent causes you may get tired of hearing about, each one calling for another special offering.

The first Special Sunday on the Methodist calendar, Human Relations Day, comes up quickly in January, on the Sunday before the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. This may sound crazy to you, but I couldn’t wait for Human Relations Day in 2019. I was looking forward to this day as I do the first day of warm weather in the springtime. And what happened? It got snowed out! None of us were here last Sunday to observe the official Human Relations Day; but it’s such an important observance that we’re using today, January 27, as a “snow date” and including nearly everything we had planned for last Sunday in this morning’s service. Human Relations Day is not something we should skip over because of a snowstorm, especially now.

I cannot think of any period in my lifetime when “human relations” have been more strained to the breaking point in our country. We’re obviously feeling this strain at the corporate level, where whole groups of people are increasingly at odds with each other – blacks and whites, rich and poor, Democrats and Republicans, cultural conservatives and cultural progressives, native born Americans and immigrants from other countries seeking a new home in America. Of course, our citizens have always had conflicting convictions about public issues. The difference today is that the climate for expressing our disagreements has become toxic. People not only take partisan stances; many choose to live in “cocoon” where they hear only their own points of view and insulate themselves from the views of others. Even worse, honest debate has degenerated into personal attack – stereotyping, name-calling, and character assassination.

When I hear about the behavior of some of our public officials today, I get nostalgic for the 1980’s, when Ronald Reagan was President and Tip O’Neill was Speaker of the House. These two men came from opposite ends of the country and stood on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Reagan was a California conservative and O’Neill was a Massachusetts liberal. They often disagreed on policy matters and would debate them fiercely in the Oval Office; but then they would go upstairs to the White House living quarters and swap funny stories over cocktails. Reagan and O’Neill were political opponents, but they were not personal enemies; in spite of their differences, they remained friends. They respected each other as human beings and even respected each other’s differing outlook on politics, which often led to compromise and constructive action.

This leads me to the conclusion that the breakdown in human relations today is not only at the corporate level but also at the personal level. The problem is not that individuals disagree

about issues, but that they disagree so disagreeably. Too often, both public officials and private citizens define “human relations” as being rigid, dismissive, and downright nasty toward others.

And it is not just in the arena of politics that we observe this kind of behavior; we see it in the realm of religion as well. As most of you know, United Methodists have been embroiled in controversy for decades over the issue of homosexuality. A Special Session of General Conference will be held next month in St. Louis to try to find a resolution. If past General Conferences are any indication, this one promises to be highly contentious. Nostrils will flare in anger and opposing sides will remain entrenched in their positions.

Meanwhile here on the home front, I’ll be offering a four-week class in February on “Homosexuality and the Church,” seeking to illuminate the issues and promote honest discussion. Make no mistake about it: this class will test the capacity of our congregation to listen to one another, to learn from one another, and to disagree without being disagreeable. This is never an easy task, even for people of faith.

I recently heard a neighboring pastor tell about an incident that occurred at last year’s New York Annual Conference on Long Island. He was standing in line for the processional at the ordination service, when someone came up to him and asked him to wear an armband to express his solidarity with her stance on the issue of homosexuality. He declined to wear the armband, admitting that he wasn’t well-informed enough to take a position one way or the other, and that he didn’t believe that the ordination service was an appropriate time or place to be demonstrating on a controversial issue like that one. Would you believe, the other person looked at him and said, “What’s wrong with you?” and stomped off! Of course you would believe, because this is the level to which human relations have fallen in our day – even in the Church!

When I heard this story, I recalled a list of maxims that I was moved to quote in my very first sermon in my first full-time pastorate. The piece was called “A Short Course in Human Relations.” You may be familiar with it, because it’s been widely utilized by businesses and volunteer organizations for many years. It struck me as an excellent guide for conducting relationships back then, and I believe it’s even more relevant and helpful today. Here it is.

In human relations . . .

The most important six words are: *“I admit I made a mistake.”*

The most important five words are: *“You did a good job.”*

The most important four words are: *“What is your opinion?”*

The most important three words are: *“Would you please . . .”*

The most important two words are: *“Thank you.”*

The most important one word is: *“We.”*

The least important one word is: *“I.”*

I can’t imagine a more truthful and timely guide to human relations than this one – and part of its genius is that it’s so concise, only 22 words in all. Let’s briefly examine each phrase or word.

In human relations, the most important six words are: “I admit I made a mistake.” How hard it is, and yet how helpful it would be, if all of us could just bring ourselves to say “I goofed . . . I misspoke . . . I mishandled that situation” when the circumstances call for it. People who

admit to a mistake are not putting themselves down; to the contrary, they are demonstrating high self-esteem and self-confidence, and also testifying to their need for growth.

The most important five words are: “You did a good job.” You’ve probably noticed that the only occasion when some folks give feedback to others is when they are pointing out something those others have done incorrectly. The reality is that family members, employees, and volunteers have a deep-seated need to know that their contributions are appreciated.

The most important four words are: “What is your opinion?” Asking this question is a way of saying to others, “I don’t presume to have all the answers; I value what you think.” Better yet, when we put others’ suggestions into action, they feel valued all the more.

The most important three words are: “Would you please . . .” The point here is that asking instead of telling achieves a better outcome in most interactions with people. Have you heard of the “toilet plunger” theory of leadership? If you have ever used a toilet plunger, you know that as you give the plunger a good push, “stuff” shoots back at you! The same principle holds true in human relations. When we tell people to do something rather than ask them to do it, nasty stuff may spit back at us.

The most important two words are: “Thank you.” Using these two simple words acknowledges another person’s contributions and gifts. All of us like to be thanked for what we do. When we express gratitude we build rapport, leading to stronger relationships. To be meaningful, thank you’s need to be specific and sincere.

The most important one word in human relations is: “We.” Leaders who are in the habit of saying “we” instead of “I” usually have a supportive team lined up behind them. Using the pronoun “we” means asking others for their input in making decisions and sharing the credit when success is achieved.

And this brings us to the least important one word in human relations: “I.” When we minimize our use of the first person singular pronoun, we’re saying, “I am not the center of the universe. I don’t engage in relationships and activities just to build up my own ego. My opinion is not infallible; my way is not the only way. I value your opinion and am willing to try your way.”

This, then, is the “Short Course in Human Relations,” and every one of us would do well to take this course and abide by its guidelines. What a difference it would make if leaders in government, business, and organized religion actually practiced these principles, and if you and I followed them in our day-to-day interactions with our spouses, children, co-workers, and fellow church members.

Now, lest you think I’m just preaching a sermon based on pop psychology, I invite you take a look at how biblical these principles really are. Today’s New Testament readings, which were actually intended for last Sunday, are Epiphany texts. Those who designed the lectionary did not choose them because they are a good fit for Human Relations Day. But upon closer inspection, both passages provide “a short course in human relations.”

In our Epistle lesson, the apostle Paul is instructing the Corinthians about spiritual gifts. He insists that the Holy Spirit bestows a variety of gifts to members of the church; that each gift

has value; and that gifts for ministry have been given to every member. Now, why do you suppose Paul would go to the trouble of spelling all of this out? Well, if you read the rest of his letter, you'll quickly realize that human relations are severely strained in the church at Corinth. Members of that congregation are caught up in the comparison syndrome – “I have a spiritual gift and you don't”; or, “You may have a spiritual gift, but my gift is more essential to the church than your gift.” Notice: one hears a whole lot of the pronoun “I” and very little of the pronoun “we.” In such a petty, patronizing, competitive environment, people rarely make statements like, “I admit I made a mistake,” “You did a good job,” “What is your opinion?” and “Would you please.” If one is constantly trying to outdo and outshine others, one cannot give credit to others where credit is due.

So Paul offers the Corinthians “A Short Course in Human Relations.” He says in effect, “Don't boast about your own gifts, no matter how abundant and important they are; recognize and respect the gifts of others. And remember that your “gifts” are just that – they are not innate talents that make you a superstar like LeBron James or Lady Gaga; they are gifts of the Holy Spirit. Instead of patting yourself on the back, give God the credit where God is due.”

When we turn to our Gospel lesson, we find Jesus attending a wedding at Cana in Galilee, where his disciples and his mother Mary are also guests. What transpires is the worst nightmare of every party host: the celebration is still in high gear, and they've run out of refreshments! It is Mary who first realizes the problem and informs Jesus about it. At first, Jesus balks at her suggestion that he should fix the problem: “What has that to do with me?” he asks (John 2:4). In John's Gospel, Jesus is clearly a divine figure, but in this story he also comes across as fully human. His first reaction is like ours often is when we're confronted with somebody else's emergency: “It's none of my business; it's not my responsibility to solve their problem.”

However, Jesus has apparently taken the “Short Course in Human Relations” and has a quick change of heart. He stops focusing on the pronoun “I” and starts focusing instead on the pronoun “we.” He recognizes someone else's need and responds to it. He transforms six jars of water into wine so the wedding guests can party on. The amazing thing is that he does this without fanfare or calling attention to himself. When the headwaiter is given the new supply of wine, he doesn't even know where it comes from. But the disciples know; they recognize that a miracle has taken place; they are mightily impressed with the miracle worker and they “believe in him” (v. 11b).

However, there is another detail to this story that is easy to miss. The disciple who later reports this incident doesn't just call it a “miracle”; he also calls it a “sign” (v. 11a); that is, something that points beyond itself, like the American flag draws our eyes beyond the stars and stripes to the country our flag stands for. In the same way, the miracle at Cana points beyond itself; it is a sign of God's glory. The point is not that Jesus has superhuman powers in and of himself, but that God's power is made manifest in Jesus. This is why we call this an “Epiphany” text. Jesus understands that he is the epiphany – the revelation – of God.

Here, John is merely echoing what he has heard Jesus say on numerous occasions: “I'm not here on my own. The Father has sent me, authorized me, and empowered me. I'm not just performing stunts to impress other people; I'm doing the works of my Father. My ministry is not ‘all about me’; it's primarily about doing God's will and meeting the needs of God's children.

It's about God's glory shining through me, God's power working in me." This is the Jesus we meet in John's Gospel – always giving credit where credit is due, which means giving the credit to God.

Friends, it's obvious that both the world and the Church are in need of "A Short Course in Human Relations." When we look at Paul's teaching about spiritual gifts and Jesus' miraculous sign at the Cana wedding, two truths become readily apparent. First, healthy human relations are rooted not in self-interest, but in our sensitivity to the gifts and needs of others. And second, human relations at their best are rooted in divine relations – in our recognition that whatever good we are and do is a gift from God and is performed for the glory of God.

The week before our denomination's official Human Relations Day, I saw an article in the Republican-American about the death of a former CIA technical operations officer named Tony Mendez. Back in 1980, this man helped to rescue six U.S. diplomats who were literally hiding for their lives in Iran. His exploits were later depicted in the Oscar-winning movie "Argo," with Ben Affleck starring in the role of Tony Mendez. When Mendez died, Affleck tweeted: "Tony Mendez was a true American hero. He was a man of extraordinary grace, decency, humility, and kindness. He never sought the spotlight for his actions, he merely sought to serve his country. I'm so proud to have worked for him and to have told one of his stories."

Now, I have no idea whether Tony Mendez was a Republican, a Democrat, a Christian, a Jew, or none of the above. But he had obviously taken the "Short Course in Human Relations" – and the results speak for themselves. As followers of Jesus Christ, how much more do you and I need to take this course and live by its principles – not just because it's the decent thing to do, but because it's the Christian thing to do.