

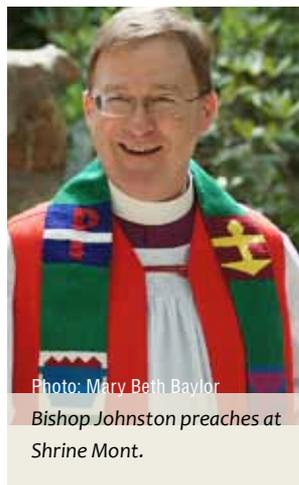
ON CHRISTIAN CIVILITY

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Years ago, I attended a conference at Kanuga, North Carolina, where Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the featured guest. The archbishop spoke about what it means to “pass the Peace” in our service of the Holy Eucharist. As he spoke, Archbishop Tutu became more and more animated; he became quite excited about the Peace. I was so accustomed to passing the Peace in church that it was a bit routine for me. Archbishop Tutu woke me up from that liturgical slumber! I had learned in seminary that the Peace is the moment that links the service of the Word and the service of the Table. But Archbishop Tutu stressed that the Peace is actually one of the holiest moments in the liturgy. He said that we should experience the Peace as a high-point in the Eucharist because it is the time when we honor the very presence of Christ to us through another person – every person. We should not be merely shaking hands with each other, he explained, but we should be bowing to one another, even genuflecting, as we bow or genuflect to the Cross or before the bread and wine of communion. In the holiness of the faith we hold in common, our Lord Jesus Christ is truly present to us in a fellow believer.

As you can tell by the title of this article, I’m not setting out to teach about the liturgical Peace; I’m getting to the matter of our civility to one another in the Church. If it is true (as I agree that it is) that Jesus Himself is present to us through another person, then surely we must honor that presence by holding one another in Christian love. We do violence to our relationships with Jesus Christ when we treat another person with disrespect. There is a big difference between the fullness of Christian love and the social graces of civility. But, as we in the Body of Christ are called to the heights and depths of Christian love for each other, a point that St. Paul makes over and over in his letters, this must surely include the virtue of civility as a norm in our relationships. To follow St. Paul again, if it takes the milk of civility to reach the solid food of Christian love, then let us be deeply mindful about being civil in our disagreements or when we find that we must take issue with someone.

You can well imagine that, as bishop, I am often brought into the confidences of personal pain suffered by parishioners and clergy, specifically within the context of congregational life. All too often we hurt each other by uncharitable actions or just thoughtlessness. Things have become worse with the expedience of e-mail, but hurtful face-to-face encounters remain common and the poison letter has not become rare. I am no stranger to such things myself; I certainly receive my share. Any hurtful tool is unacceptable, deserving no place within Christian community or discourse.



So, what is Christian civility? I’m not suggesting superficial niceties, and I am the last one to think that Christians should all be personal or social milquetoast. I will begin to answer this question by pointing to what our civility doesn’t look like. First, we should never descend into personal insults. Second, I’ve noticed that attributing malicious motives to the other person is a common

failing. Both of these personal violations assume that we know all of the facts and that we know the heart, mind and soul of the other person. The key to the exercise of Christian civility is that we must never make either assumption. Taking the time and effort to ask ourselves about these points goes a long way as to whether or not our actions look and feel like a Christian’s life.

To put things positively, Christian civility will always give the benefit of the doubt to one another. This is difficult, but Jesus never said that the virtues of the Gospel are without personal cost. Moreover, we are to rise above “scoring points.” Most often, this means that we surrender our sense of righteous indignation (this sense always wants to attack). Finally, we must accept that we can never truly know the heart and mind of another. Only God can fathom such depths (see Psalm 139 – my own favorite).

It follows that we must continuously test ourselves as to our own Christian civility. I return to Archbishop Tutu’s conviction about Jesus being present in and through another person. Before sending that e-mail or letter, before making a vengeful point or serving up a certain tone of voice, ask yourself not only “What would Jesus do?” but also “What would I say or do to Jesus Himself?” +