

“Rebirth of Civility” John 3:1-7

That which is hateful to you,  
do not do to your fellow.  
That is the whole Torah;  
the rest is the explanation.  
- Talmud (Jewish Wisdom)

Yesterday’s memorial for Rudy Dorman was full of wonderful stories. What is and has always been clear about Rudy is that he was a gentleman first class. His daughter Helga would add that he was also a little salty, but that’s what made him so lovable.

Rudy was what John Donnelly referred to yesterday as “enthusiastically kind.” Very early on in my ministry with you all, I remember a young man coming to church. He was not going to be around Sonoma long, he had come for work and was on his way to another job. By the time the service was over and I reached coffee hour, Rudy had his arm around this young fella inviting him to come for a paddle on the river.

He was warmhearted and generous and he believed in unity with every fiber of his being. He believed in this church and the best of who we are when we come together as a congregation. We saw that in action yesterday.

A few weeks back Rudy, took my hands in his and pointed to the sign just outside the sanctuary, the yard sign by the tree about caring for all people. With tears in his eyes and a catch in his throat he said, “I am so proud of who we are and so happy to be part of this church.”

Today’s scripture is what is referred to by theologians as an epistle. It is part of the Gospel of John but was likely a letter that was written some years after the Gospel itself by members of the same religious community as a means of creating a unified understanding of purpose.

As is true whenever people come together and try to do something important- there are bound to be differing opinions as to how best to go about it. This passage from 1 John was written to support the kind of loving kindness, Rudy stood for all his life.

I should point out that the story preceding today's quirky invitation to be reborn- features Jesus in a fit of rage, complete with whip and wrath for those seeking to profit off the crowds gathering in the temple to worship God.

Jesus was justifiably angry, because he felt the religious people had lost the plot. They weren't supposed to be there for their own monetary gain, they were at the temple to connect with God and each other in an effort to make the world a more fair and just place.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel. So, this moment between Jesus and Nicodemus signifies in the Gospel of John, the past religious leadership intersecting with the future of God's vision for the people.

I think, we are in a bit of a slump in this valley. It is seven months since the fires, the very first house has finally been constructed in Coffey Park, but if I take a spiritual read of our community, we are weary.

On a national level, I can safely say, this has been the longest six months on record and the next president will not take office until Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. We are currently only one sixth of the way through this presidency, and many of us feeling understandably weary on that front as well.

Our valley, our nation, could use an epistle right about now. A letter that reminds us of our shared humanity, and common purpose. Religious epistles remind us that the heart that unites us is greater than the arguments that divide us.

At the workshop I attended back in February, I was introduced to what Krista Tippet calls guidelines for better conversation. This might be the epistle we need most right now, the rules are simple and easy to remember;

- 1) **Choose words that matter**- we need words with power to convey real truth. Words have the force of action and become virtues in and of themselves. The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others.

Words are one of our primary ways we reach across the mystery of each other, the world needs now the most vivid and transformative universe of words we can muster.

- 2) **Humility** is a companion to curiosity, surprise, and delight. Spiritual humility is not about getting small. It is about encouraging others to be big. It is not about debasing oneself, but about approaching everything and everyone with a readiness to be surprised and delighted.

The goal of humility is to be planted in what we **know**, while living expectantly for discoveries yet to come.

- 3) **Generous Listening** is an everyday art and virtue, but it's an art we have lost and must learn anew. Listening is more than being quiet while others have their say. It is about presence as much as receiving; it is about connection more than observing. Real listening is powered by curiosity. It involves vulnerability — a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. It is never in “gotcha” mode.

The generous listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own most generous words and questions.

Like humility, patience is not to be mistaken for meekness and ineffectuality. It can be the fruit of a full-on reckoning with reality — a commitment to move through the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.

- 4) **A spiritual view of time; a long view of time** — seasonal and cyclical, resistant to the illusion of time as a bully, time as a matter of deadlines.

Human transformation takes time — longer than we want it to — but it is what is necessary for social transformation. A long, patient view of time will replenish our sense of our capacities and our hope for the world.

- 5) **Hospitality and Adventurous Civility** The adventure of civility for our time can't be a mere matter of politeness or niceness. Adventurous civility honors the difficulty of what we face and the complexity of what it means to be human.

It doesn't celebrate diversity by putting it up on a pedestal and ignoring its messiness and its depths. The intimate and civilizational questions that perplex and divide us will not be resolved quickly.

Civility, in our world of change, is about creating new possibilities for living forward while being different and even continuing to hold profound disagreement.

Hospitality is a bridge to all the great virtues, it is immediately accessible. You don't have to love or forgive or feel compassion to extend hospitality.

John said yesterday that on one of their many walks through the marchlands, Rudy once remarked that the world would be a different place if people could co-exist the way nature can.

Tippet points out that, "As creatures, it seems, we imagine a homogeneity in other groups that we know not to be there in our own. But new social realities are brought into being over time by a quality of relationship between unlikely combinations of people.

When in doubt or times of weariness, practice the following;  
Use words that matter,  
Exercise humility and engage in generous listening,  
Take a long view of time and practice adventurous civility  
and radical hospitality.

To love one another in this way is what it means to live into the Gospel truth.  
To love one another as Rudy loved, as Jesus loved is to close the gap  
between humanity and God. If not us who, if not now when?

Amen