

“Gentle Wisdom”

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Did you see it? Did you see the replay of the dad who caught the foul ball at the Phillies game last Tuesday night? His first ever catch, even though he’s been attending Phillies games for many years and waiting patiently for that opportunity. When he caught the foul ball in the fifth inning, you could see his excitement as he fist-bumped his buddies, high-fived his little three year old daughter, Emily, and then handed her the ball, which she promptly threw over the wall back onto the field! “I’ve been waiting for so long to catch a foul ball, and over the edge it goes,” he said later with a laugh.

But the really beautiful part of this story is what happened next. The father at first looked shocked and appalled, but quickly recovered when he saw the look on his daughter’s face that told him she was beginning to think that she had done something wrong. As soon as he saw that look, he took her in his arms with a big smile on his face. The life-long Phillies fan didn’t stand a ghost of a chance up against the relatively new young father concerned about his little girl. “I didn’t want her to think she did anything wrong,” he explained. Way to go, dad!

When I read the Gospel text for this Sunday about Jesus taking a child in his arms, I couldn’t help thinking about this dad, Steve Monforto. I couldn’t help thinking about how he had his priorities so much in order that in that split second, he didn’t even have to think about it. A baseball or his daughter’s feelings? No contest! Since that time the incident has been all over the news. Mr. Monforto has been given a couple of balls from the Philadelphia Phillies to make up for the one tossed over the side by Emily, one of them signed by outfielder Jason Werth who hit the foul ball in question. The whole family has appeared on *The Today Show*, been interviewed by many others, and everyone in the family received Philadelphia Phillies jerseys.¹

I have to think that part of the reason this seemingly insignificant story has gotten so much press is because we all got to observe someone behaving well, doing the right thing, sublimating his own needs for the sake of his daughter’s feelings. This in contrast to other incidents we have all observed this summer in our shared public life where we have witnessed people displaying anger, pettiness, and ill-mannered behavior. We’ve seen the “town-hall meetings” where some attendees appeared to behave in a way reminiscent of guests on the Jerry Springer Show. We watched the President being heckled during a speech at a joint session of congress. If you are a tennis fan and watched the U.S. Open Tennis Tournament you may have seen the complete meltdown of Serena Williams who shouted threats and profanities at a lowly line judge who had dared to call Serena for a footfall on what was a match point opportunity for her opponent. Then on Monday even the unflappable Roger Federer in a match he eventually lost had, what for him, was a rare display of emotion, swearing at the umpire, although from a much less threatening, seated position.

I haven’t this, but I understand that at the Video Music Awards last Tuesday, when the teen age country pop singer Taylor Swift came on stage to accept the award for best female video, the rapper Kanye West snatched the microphone from out of her hands and told the audience, in effect, that the award should have gone instead to one of the other nominees.

Even in our Gospel reading this morning, when Jesus put that child in the midst of the disciples it was because his disciples had been behaving badly, boorishly. “What were you arguing about on the way?” Jesus asks them. They all hung their heads. No one would answer, because, as Mark tells it, they had been arguing about who was the greatest. Then Jesus, in a kind of acted out parable, puts a little child in their midst and says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” and “Anyone who welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.”

It seems that everyone these days is decrying the demise of civility in our culture. Stephen Carter has a book out entitled, *Civility*. Pier Massimo Forni, Professor of Italian literature at Johns Hopkins University says: “The decline of civility is a social phenomenon that is being discussed now with the frequency and intensity that was not there 10 years ago.” That, he thinks, is a good thing. Professor Forni, who refers to himself jokingly as “a self-appointed manners maven” is co-founder of “The Civility Initiative,” a project that has been active for ten years that is designed to heighten the awareness of our need to be kind to each other.²

This week conservative columnist Kathleen Parker, talking about Representative Joe Wilson’s outburst last week, said that it should not have happened. Why? “Because civilization is a fragile and delicate idea, held together by a few mere threads, bound together by little more than a wisp of mutual consent. Frays in those threads are daily apparent....Across the spectrum of society, people are behaving badly. Even those at the very top of their games, who enjoy wealth and status, no longer can be relied upon to carry the standard of exemplary behavior. If ever there were one place we might hope to find people of respectful temperament, it would be where those elected to govern convene to hear the president....People in positions of power and privilege have a duty to perform at a higher level. If not they, then who?”³

With this backdrop, we come today to another part of the Epistle of James, that practical guide to Christian living with the emphasis on behavior rather than doctrine. For James, it is not so much a matter of what we say in our creeds, but what we do in our deeds. And in this part of his epistle he asks this penetrating question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” How would you spot such a person? Is it someone who says things that sound very erudite? No. Not according to James. For James it comes down to how we behave. He says, “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” The wisdom that comes from above, he says, the kind that is connected to our wise Creator, “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

Pure, peaceable, gentle. Those kinds of words put into practice would go a long way toward furthering the Civility Initiative. Forget about the John Hopkins Civility Initiative. We should each be promoting our own civility initiative. It’s nothing new, really. It’s all there in the Sermon on the Mount: “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:27-31) Bless those who curse you? Who does that?

We got a couple of calls last week from a local commentator on politics and nearly everything else who has his own cable TV show where he expresses his views on a myriad of subjects. He had called once and had spoken to Nancy about something and then called back and I answered the phone. He seemed a little taken aback. He wanted to tell Nancy that his show would be on that evening, so I said I would tune in. He thought that might not be a good idea. I told him that even though we see things differently and even though he had referred to us here at Westminster once as “those looney liberals” because, I think, we had had some programs on Islam, I told him that it is ok to disagree with each other. He had called some years back complaining about something and at that time I had invited him to come over and chat sometime. I invited him again. He said, “You’re a nice man. I mean that.” I told him I was sure that he was also. There is no need not to be civil.

While looking for information on civility I came across the *110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. They are based upon a set of rules composed by French Jesuits in 1595 and by the time George Washington was sixteen, he had copied these rules out by hand.

The article where I found these rules says: "Today many, if not all of (them) sound a little fussy if not downright silly. It would be easy to dismiss them as outdated and appropriate to a time of powdered wigs and quills, but they reflect a focus that is increasingly difficult to find. They all have in common a focus on other people rather than the narrow focus of our own self-interests that we find so prevalent today. Fussy or not, they represent more than just manners. They are the small sacrifices that we should all be willing to make for the good of all and the sake of living together."

Rule #1: Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

Rule #4: In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet. (One wonders what the Jesuits would have said about the use of cell phones in the company of others.)

Rule #6: (One near and dear to my heart) Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others Stop.

Rule #12 Shake not the head, Feet, or Legs roll not the Eyes lift not one eyebrow higher than the other wry not the mouth, and bedew no mans face with your Spittle, by approaching too near him when you Speak.

Rule #50 Be not hasty to believe flying Reports to the Disparagement of any.

Rule #65 Speak not injurious Words neither in Jest nor Earnest Scoff at none although they give Occasion.

Rule #80: Be not Tedious in Discourse or in reading unless you find the Company pleased therewith.

Rule #95: Put not your meat to your Mouth with your Knife in your hand neither Spit forth the Stones of any fruit Pie upon a Dish nor Cast anything under the table.

Well, they certainly are quaint, and very dated. But as the article suggested, they put the focus upon other people rather than upon ourselves. They "proclaim our respect for others and in turn give us the gift of self-respect and heightened self-esteem."⁴

In the end, though, we don't need 110 rules. We don't even need ten rules. We only need one. That is the one that Jesus offered in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." If we can learn to put that golden rule into practice, then all those wonderful attributes spelled out by James in his description of a wise person will be ours.

¹ *CBS Sports*

² <http://krieger.jhu.edu/civility>

³ Perchance to Duel? September 16, 2009

⁴ *Foundations Magazine*