



## Sermon of January 17, 1999



### Rev. Mark Trotter

First United Methodist Church of San Diego

(619) 297-4366

Fax (619) 297-2933

---

### "BEING MORE THAN CIVIL"

I Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

The trial of a president is a terrible thing for a country to endure. We can be grateful that in the Senate, at least, the proceedings have been conducted in a more civil manner than we have been subjected to over the last several years. Although we have been told that just underneath the surface, in the Senate as well, there are deep divisions and the same partisan acrimony that has characterized the investigation and the impeachment.

There has always been division in the world. In our own society, in America, there has always been difference of opinion. That is just the way life is. But in the past, at least in my memory, the divisions could be transcended when parties would compromise for the sake of the unity of the nation, especially in times of crisis in the nation, when it was generally felt that there was a need for unity among us.

Someone pointed out that that bipartisanship was easier in the past, because in the past, this country enjoyed a certain cultural homogeneity that is missing in our time. What we are seeing in our time being played out in the Congress is the growing division in our society, where the alienation is so deep that civility is interpreted as a kind of betrayal of the cause. You are not supposed to be civil to the enemy. And you certainly would never compromise if the other side is considered to be the enemy. If that is the case in our society today, then we are indeed a nation in crisis.

Stephen Carter makes the distinction between a community and a society. He says a society is where there are large groups of people who are strangers to one another, and yet they have to get along with one another. To do that they must establish rules that will allow us to get along, like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, to insure an orderliness in a society, a fairness and justice, and a certain respect for one another.

That is called civility. And maybe that is all you can expect in a society with so much diversity. You don't have to agree with everybody. You don't even have to like everybody. But you should respect the dignity of everybody. If you do that, then you have a civil society.

I've come to believe that you can tell a civil society by its use of humor. Humor is a great defuser of hostility in a civil society. The British, whose society is renowned for civility, is also famous for its political humor. One of my favorite anecdotes is about Disraeli, when he was Prime Minister of Great Britain, who was asked, "What is the difference between a misfortune and a calamity?" He said, "If Gladstone [who was his political adversary] were to fall into the Thames, that would be a misfortune. If anyone should pull him out, that would be a calamity."

That kind of political wit is what is missing in Washington. They are deadly serious in Washington, which is the sign that civility, the art of living with diversity, has been replaced with partisanship, the strategy of enforcing conformity.

In a society you hope for civility. But in community, you hope for something more. In community you hope for forgiveness, compassion, love, and reconciliation. The family is the most fundamental community. Family is where you know you are loved and understood, forgiven, supported and reconciled.

What Paul is saying to the Corinthians, in our epistle lesson for this morning, is that the Church should be a community, like a family. The Church, he will say, should be the society that is made up of all kinds of folk in this world who behave like a family. What's more, the mission of the Church is to transform the society in which the Church finds itself, into a community. That is what the Church is for. That is what its mission is. So, he says, we need to get along in the Church, so the Church can be the model for the world, and so the world is in the salutation.

Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the salutation that Paul uses in all of his letters. In fact, you could say that this is Paul's trademark. He is the only one who uses it. It is designed, I suppose, for the diverse nature of the churches that he founded in the Mediterranean World, this inclusive society of the Roman Empire, where churches were made up of people of all kinds of ethnic backgrounds, and

especially Greeks and Jews. So the greeting, the salutation: "grace," which is "charis," the Greek word, and "peace," which is "shalom," the Hebrew word. If you are going to have community, he is saying, then you have to have both these things. You have to have grace and peace.

Grace means unmerited love. That is the common denominator of all community. Paul realized that. You cannot have community without grace. Luther, 1500 years later, will come to the same conclusion, and he'll make grace the cornerstone of the reform of the Church. He will say that what constitutes the Church is not our merit or our accomplishments, not even our spiritual accomplishments. But what constitutes the Church is what we all have in common, the grace that we have received from Jesus Christ. Our merits, our achievements, even our spiritual achievements, separate us. Grace is what unites us. And grace is what separates the Church from any other institution in this world. We all believe we are here not by our qualifications, but by God's grace alone.

I remember Groucho Marx turned down membership in a club, I think it was the Friar's Club, because, he said, "I refuse to belong to a club that would make me a member."

The Church is the organization that refuses to accept qualifications for membership, except one: I am in need of grace, and I received that grace through Jesus Christ.

I've got to be careful not to be misunderstood here, for there is only one qualification for entering the Church: confession of your need for grace. But there are a number of expectations once you are here. No qualifications, but expectations. All of the expectations of church membership are consistent with what you would expect of somebody who lives by grace: faithfulness, generosity, and service.

Phil Yancey wrote a book entitled, *What's So Amazing About Grace*. He said, "You ask people in the world, 'How do you get to heaven?' and they will generally say, 'By being good.'" Yancey wrote that when he reads the New Testament he sees something else there. He says, "To get to heaven, according to the New Testament, all we need to do is cry 'Help,' and God welcomes anyone home who asks for help, for grace."

In fact, the stories of Jesus, especially the parables of Jesus, say that God takes the initiative in offering us grace. That was the most astonishing thing about Christian preaching. Not only does it say that grace given to us is unmerited, it says that God has taken the initiative to offer it to us.

Did you ever notice this? The service professions, those professions that are supposed to serve society, like medicine, law, religion, counseling, social work, that the professionals in all of those professions sit in offices, and people make appointments to come and see them.

But not God. God so loved the world he came to us, took the initiative to come to us in Jesus Christ. Which means, he is like the shepherd who seeks out the one who is lost, and leaves the ninety-nine behind. Or, like the woman who sweeps out her house to find the lost coin. Or, like the father who goes down the road to embrace the child who was lost, but now is found.

Yancey wrote that he has found in Mozart's *Requiem* a prayer which he now uses daily. It goes like this: "Remember, merciful Jesu, that I am the cause of your journey." I am the reason Jesus

came to earth, with grace, to seek me out.

That is what we all have in common. And that is why when Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he begins with a salutation: "Grace and peace to you," for he is reminding them only of what they have already received, what we all have in common. If that is true, then it ought to make a difference in how we live together. We ought to live together in peace.

The common understanding of peace is that it is the cessation of hostility, the absence of violence. Perhaps in a society that is all that we can hope for. Perhaps it's the only kind of peace that we can have, as when the riots erupt in a city, or in a nation, such as what we are witnessing tragically in Bosnia today. Peace means that's what we pray for, that they would just stop fighting, and retreat to their separate territories and leave each other alone. That is what the world thinks of when it thinks of peace.

But that is not the peace that Paul is talking about. Paul is talking about shalom, the peace that the prophets envisioned, the way the world will be when God finally has his will done on earth as it is done in heaven. Where right relationships exist between individuals, and between the individual and God. Right relationships. That is why shalom is most often defined as harmony.

The peace that the world looks for is the lack of dissonance and cacophony. It is called "peace and quiet." That is what the world wants. But the peace that the Bible is talking about is not quiet, it is harmony. It is like an orchestra, where each instrument plays its part, and the result is a symphony. It is why in great moments in the past century, in the 20th century, musicians have tried to enlist orchestras to play together as a sign, a symbol, of the peace that is possible in this world.

Pablo Casals, you would remember, would play Bach as the intonation for a time of peace. It was also Casals, who said, if all the orchestras in the world would play Beethoven's 9th Symphony at the same time, there would be peace of earth. That is the peace the Bible is talking about. Shalom, harmony between all people, and harmony between the creation and the Creator.

That is what Paul means by peace. It is not unlike another word he uses in this text. It is down at the bottom of the text, the word "fellowship," which is the Greek word, "koinonia." It is one of the most treasured words in the Christian lexicon. It is the word that is used by one of the classes in this church as their name, Koinonia. Koinonia is like shalom, it is a community in which there are right relationships. Where we care for one another, where we accept one another, we support one another, we love one another. "All our mutual burdens bear."

All of this is based on grace. As Paul says elsewhere, "We love because Christ first loved us." So as I said before, there is only one requirement for entering the Church: confess your need of grace. But there are several expectations of the person who has received grace. One of them is that you will try to live at peace with everyone. "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

So you see this greeting and salutation turned out to be much more substantial after all. But there is even more. And this is the most surprising, and the most wonderful part about this text.

The first verse read,

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.

Who is Sosthenes? He is saying, Sosthenes is joining me in writing this letter to you. Who is Sosthenes? Well this is what makes Bible study so much fun, because you can look it up. When you look it up you find that Sosthenes is mentioned in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

The scene that is described there in Acts occurred in Corinth some years before Paul wrote this letter. Paul was arrested by the police and dragged before the Roman proconsul, whose name was Gallio. He dismissed the charges brought against Paul, and said that this was an internal matter for the synagogue. Take it back to the synagogue, solve the question there.

Which was right, because in those days the Christians still saw themselves as part of Judaism. They hung around synagogues all over the world to debate scripture. That was what you did in synagogues in those days, debate scripture. They would argue that Jesus was the Messiah, according to the scripture. Which was not received with overwhelming gladness by the rulers of the synagogues.

The ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, according to Acts, is named Sosthenes. He took all that he could from Paul. He called the police, had Paul arrested for disturbing a religious service, or something like that. Now Paul writes the Corinthians. In effect he says, you all remember Sosthenes, our tormentor. He is now our brother. What's more, he is my companion, we preach together the gospel of Christ.

I can just see it. I can see Paul and Sosthenes on the circuit. Paul preaches first. He talks about grace, about how God came into this world to reconcile the world unto himself, and then call each one of us into a ministry of reconciliation, to forgive those who have sinned against us and be reconciled with them, so that there will be peace on earth. That is what he preached. Then he said, I want you to meet someone. And he would introduce Sosthenes. And he would tell how Sosthenes hated Paul, and Paul didn't feel so warm toward Sosthenes either. But he would say the grace of Christ is at work in me, and through grace I have received mercy, therefore I must be merciful. So I went to Sosthenes, and I forgave him. And because of grace, once there was hostility and now there is peace. Sosthenes is now my brother.

It is amazing. Then Paul and Sosthenes would embrace, exchange the kiss of peace, so the whole world could see, there is a more excellent way. It is possible for there to be community where there is grace and peace.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

[Click here to send your comments via e-mail to Rev. Mark Trotter.](#)

If you find these sermons of benefit, please let us know. Printed or audio tape copies of all sermons are available by subscription. Your e-mail is welcome.

[Click here to send e-mail to the church staff.](#)

Sermon page volunteer, Dave Watters

---

[NEWS](#) \* [SERMON](#) \* [MUSIC](#) \* [KIDS](#) \* [YOUTH](#) \* [COUNSELING](#) \* [MAIL](#) \* [HOME](#)