

“ALL THINGS NEW: III - NEW WAYS”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
January 15, 2012

I John 4:7-16

Today is Human Relations Sunday in the United Methodist Church. It is the day on which we are reminded of the call to live in harmony with all people, and to help tear down the walls that divide us. It is no accident that this day falls on the Sunday closest to the day we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, since he spent his life, and indeed gave his life to that end.

I want to say, on this Human Relations Sunday of 2012, I think we've come a long way in terms of how we treat each other, but we still have a long way to go. Let me illustrate. Here is the good news and the bad [news](#):

The good news - Many months ago, when the movie “The Help” was released, I went to see it at Peoples Plaza in Glasgow with my mother and a friend. If you haven't seen it, you need to know that “The Help” is the story of some African-Americans domestics in the 60's, and the conditions under which they worked. And if you haven't seen it, I recommend that you do - it's a good movie. Not only good, because it is a good story told and acted out in a stellar manner, but because it is a vivid portrait of what life was like in the 60's.

I would think that young people seeing it are shocked by what they see. Actually, I'll never forget that, while we were watching the movie, a scene came up where one of the women was spoken to in a blatantly racist manner, and I could hear my friend gasp! The movie is filled with things we have long forgotten about, but things that were very real - like whites not wanting to be around blacks for fear of getting germs, and blacks having to use different and, almost certainly, inferior facilities for everything.

You watch that movie and say to yourself, “Thank God, we've come so far from that.” That's the good news!

Here's the bad: We may have come far in some ways, but we still have a ways to go in treating others well. Let me tell you what made me realize that anew just a few days ago.

I was coming out of the street that goes down by Aldi's to the County Administration Building. I was sitting on that street between Aldi's and the Social

Security Building - at that stoplight. I was the second car in line, and it was dark - about 5:30 at night. There are two lanes going out of there - the left hand lane is for left hand turns onto Route 40, and the right hand lane is for those going straight across Rt. 40 to the car dealership or making a right onto Rt. 40 to go towards Glasgow.

So there I sat, the second car in line. There were cars behind me, and cars beside me, presumably going straight or off to the right. Well, the light changes to green, the car in front of me makes the left hand turn towards Walmart, but so does the car that has been waiting in the right hand lane! Naturally, they almost crashed together, but they both swerved at the last minute.

The guy on the right, who had made the illegal turn, honked his horn to beat the band, and then, squealed his wheels moving over to the shoulder of the road. So I thought that was that, but no. He pulls up right beside the other driver (who had been in the correct turn lane, I might add), rolls down his window, screams at the other driver, sticks his hand out and flips him the bird, and then squeals off, and turns onto Delancey Road.

I was so tempted to follow him, and say, "Hey, guy, you were the one who was wrong," but I'm no dummy, and I like being alive!

You know, I see that kind of thing way too often, and I know you probably do too. We still, too often, treat other people poorly. And you know, I think this always-in-a-hurry, technological age in which we live, somehow contributes to that. Our technology keeps us one step removed from each other - we don't have to be face to face, we don't have to have real conversations, we do so much electronically - and in the process, kindness, dignity and respect get short shrift sometimes.

So it is a good thing, indeed, that we have a Human Relations Sunday in the church, for it is a chance for us to remember, and if necessary, make a new start when it comes to how we treat others.

The late psychologist and writer Leo Buscaglia once said, "We must always remember that humans are not things and stop dealing with people as if they are objects. We are frail, we are vulnerable, we are tender, we're easily spooked. It is so easy, because we are so frail, to put a hole in someone and make him suffer. But it's almost as easy to cover up the hole with the same finger that made it. It just depends on what side of the person you're on." (Leo Buscaglia, *Living, Loving and Learning*, p. 51)

Buscaglia was absolutely right - how we treat people depends on what side of them we are. Do we want what's best for others?

We need look no further than to the One we have come to worship this day to know who we are called to be, what we are called to do, and how we are called to live. Jesus showed us everyday of His earthly life what it was to be **for** people, to want what's best for them, to show them in His actions that He respected them and valued them. Turn to any page in any of the Gospels and you will see, time and again, how He treated people - as precious children of God.

He was especially good at reaching out to those who were not treated kindly by others. One pastor put it this way: "Jesus noticed those who were sick or suffering, whom others thought would always be that way because their condition was a consequence of their sin, and he reached out and healed them. Jesus talked to those whom no one else would talk to. Jesus noticed those who were 'invisible' to others, and brought them into his flock. Jesus crossed borders and reached out to those who were outcasts and aliens. He met with a woman in Samaria when no one else would do such a thing, had a 'holy conversation,' which convinced her that she had met the Messiah, and she spread the good news to all in her town. Jesus broke down all the barriers that we human beings build between ourselves and others, and invited all God's children to God's great wedding banquet." (On-line, James Erlandson, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer)

If you or I ever wonder what we should do when it comes to dealing with other people, we need look no further than to how Jesus dealt with every single person with whom He came into contact. It was always with dignity, respect and an awareness that that person, as much as another other person alive, was a precious child of God.

We have a choice to make in every human encounter that we have. We can treat that person as a beloved child of God, or we can treat them otherwise. How often we choose otherwise. Adam Hamilton, a wonderful pastor and writer, talks about our tendency to do just that. He writes, "One of the hallmarks of our tendency to sin is that we feel the need to criticize, and we feel qualified to make judgements, often with very little information. We slander others for a host of reasons. Perhaps we're jealous of another's success. Maybe we're just insecure. But we also find a tendency to speak ill of others when they disagree with our way of seeing the world. Rather than trying to fully understand why they believe what they believe, and being open to the possibility that we are wrong, we feel threatened by their convictions and look for ways to criticize the individual and his or her convictions. Because talking with those who disagree with us face-to-face about why we think they are wrong might be a bit too threatening, and would require that we listen to their views and arguments, we find it easier to criticize them where it is safe, among friends or like-minded people, on our blogs, or via e-mail."

He continues: "We say things to our friends about these persons we would

never say to them face-to-face. We judge their motives and their deeds. Most of us have committed this sin. We have all wounded others by our words. We have misrepresented them, spoken out of turn, and judged them without really taking the time to understand them.” (Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, p. 20)

That’s a lot to swallow, and some of it is pretty harsh, but if you’re like me, when you heard it, it made you flinch a little because it is true. We do find it easy to criticize, and judge, and keep people at arm’s length. We do find it easy way too often to not treat people as Jesus did.

The writer of today’s Epistle lesson invites us to a new way. He invites us to be loving people, just as Jesus loved. And in fact, he tells us we can do that because Jesus has loved us first. Jesus has loved each of us as a precious, beloved child of God, and His love among us, gave us life itself - free, full, abundant, saved. How can we then, he writes, do less than that? How can we not love others in return?

So clearly, the call for us on this Human Relations Sunday, and every day, is for us to treat everyone well - to treat all we meet with love, dignity, respect, and care. We do it first, because we have been treated that way by God Himself in Jesus Christ.

But we do it also, because when we live that way, we are indeed, “the salt of the earth” Jesus talked about in the Gospel lesson. When we do it, we show people in a tangible way what God is like. When we do it, God’s love becomes real to others.

When so many of you spent time at the Rotating Homeless Shelter this week, and treated all who were there with dignity, respect, love and care, you showed them the face of God. When some of you went over to Thomson Estates Elementary School to mentor children who need a little extra help, you showed them the face of God. When some of you helped here yesterday with a memorial service and luncheon, you showed those who were here the face of God.

When you stop to listen to someone who has a problem and needs to talk, you show them the face of God. When you affirm someone who’s feeling down, or include someone who’s feeling left out, you show them the face of God.

When you don’t retaliate in anger, but apologize and ask forgiveness, you show someone the face of God. When you and I love people and treat them the way Jesus loved and treated them, we show people the face of God.

I want to invite all of this on this Human Relations Sunday, and tomorrow on

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and all the days ahead to make a choice to treat everyone we meet as the precious child of God that they are. It won't always be easy, but if we remember to do as Jesus did, and if we remember that when we do, someone will see God's love in action, perhaps we'll do better at it than we have in the past.

I want to close with a challenge that one nun, Sr. Joan Chittester, offers. It goes like this. She says, "Try saying this silently to everyone and everything you see for thirty days and see what happens to your soul: 'I wish you happiness now and whatever will bring happiness to you in the future.' If we said it to the sky (she says), we would have to stop polluting; if we said it when we see the ponds and lakes and streams, we would have to stop using them as garbage dumps and sewers . . . if we said it to people, we would have to stop stoking the fires of enmity around us. Beauty and human warmth would take root in us like a clear, hot June day. We would change." (*Spiritual Literacy*, "Community," p. 490)

Might be worth a try. On this day and all the days ahead, may you and I love one another as God has loved us, and may the way we live show all whom we meet, the face of God. May it be so.

Amen.

Hymn - Martin Luther King Jr's favorite - his last words to musician Ben Branch - "Ben, make sure you play "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty."