

*Being Humble in Our Toxic Culture of Rudeness*

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Ephesians 4:22-5:2

I was listening to an hour-long interview with Las Vegas Police sergeant Michael Lardomita the other day.

They have a violent crime rate that is more than twice the national average in a jurisdiction that extends 90-minutes south to Laughlin, so during his twenty years on the force he's been through some pretty rough stuff.

But what caught my attention was his comment that interactions with the public have gotten progressively worse over the past ten years or so.

He said people have become more rude, confrontational and short-tempered.

Officers all over the country are saying the same thing - and teachers, too.

Even workers at McDonalds deal with ruder and more aggressive customers than in past years.

At first glance, rudeness may not seem like a "spiritual issue" for a sermon, but it actually is because it is rooted in the fractured state of our souls and our society, and because it creates an emotional and spiritual atmosphere that divides, depresses and diminishes our lives.

Researchers describe an epidemic of rudeness with such profound effects that some call it a "silent killer".

And they mean that literally, not as hyperbole.

One thing that surprised me is that there is a rising scientific specialty of rudeness research ... like society is now so rude and toxic that we need to hire professionals to help us figure-out what's going on.

We've all experienced it, and Paul's Letter to the Ephesians has something to say about it.

Together, let's read Ephesians 4:29: *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

I think we can agree that there are too many words spewing out of the mouths of too many people – starting with our leaders – that are not helpful for building others up.

A little context: Paul wrote this letter to a church he founded in the bustling port city of Ephesus.

Ephesus is located in modern day Turkey at the crossroads of trade from all corners of the Roman Empire, so travelers from many cultures rubbed shoulders there.

In the beginning, the First Church of Ephesus flourished amidst this diversity, but after Paul moved-on, divisions and conflicts arose, prompting this letter that Paul wrote from his prison cell in Rome.

Its theme is unity of the Christian community.

In this chapter, Paul makes a list of sins which damage a community and pollute a person's life.

In a sense, there is nothing original here: it urges virtues and warns of vices that foreign travelers in Ephesus would recognize from their home cultures.

But it is radically different in that its exhortations do not depend on self-discipline, self-renewal or self-motivation.

Paul says that with our baptism, we are given a fresh start as we enter into a new family, God's family, and have God's renewing power working within us to make this new life possible.

Elsewhere Paul said,

Galatians 2:20, *It is no longer I who am living inside of me, but it is Christ living inside of me.*

He says we begin the is journey by leaving our old culture's polluted ways.

Ephesians 4:22-24 *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

The Greek verbs we translate as “put off” and “put on” were normally applied to changing our clothes.

This is actually a strong imperative sentence: strip off your dirty old clothes.

Putting on a clean shirt over a sweaty, muddy undershirt is only cosmetic.

You’ll still have b. o.

Paul says strip off those stained and smelly clothes – get out of them right now - and start fresh with your baptism.

Then we are beckoned to be imitators of God, not just for our own virtue, but for the good of the community of believers.

Ephesians 4:1-3 *I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received (from baptism, which brought you into the community of Christ). Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

So, Paul is cautioning the stressed Ephesians to be humble and gentle with each other so that their community does not fracture.

2018 America could use this advice.

Our problems arise when we disconnect from God and human concerns of others, which then gives free reign to our selfish nature.

And as our deceitful, destructive desires flourish, they spread to others – just like a summer cold spreads through an office.

Why this growth of rudeness?

Researchers note that rudeness has become equated with strength and power, while politeness and humility have become associated weaknesses.

Who gets press coverage?

The abrasive politicians, shouting pseudo journalists, and arrogant TV personalities.

Meanwhile, people who are humble and considerate are dismissed as snowflakes.

There's been a lot of talk about people's aggressive, even slanderous, behavior on the internet, which we've assumed comes from their feeling anonymous while on the web.

But researchers say that it is more than that because similar behaviors are growing everywhere, even in workplaces where people know each other.

Some believe that simple eye contact is essential to healthy relationships.

One recent study tested this hypothesis by placing a group of workers around work stations where they would have to look at one another and make eye contact when they talked.

A second group was assigned an identical project but were placed in cubicles where they communicated via computer terminals.

It didn't take long for differences in behaviors to emerge.

The workers who did not make eye contact with colleagues became more aggressive and less cooperative.

They also became less creative, another phenomenon that popped-up in multiple studies of rudeness.

Eye contact not only allows us to see the humanity of the other person, it also gives us running feedback about how they are perceiving us.

This is called the "looking glass effect" because their eyes and faces show us if we are being understood, if we've offended them or if we've crossed a behavioral boundary.

So, how is being engulfed in a culture of rudeness affecting us?

Are we just being nostalgic for a gentler, more civil time?

Wherever it happens – on the web, in person or in a crowd – rudeness is sticky, it lingers and can affect us for hours.

It's been shown that something like witnessing someone acting aggressively rude to their barista at Starbucks in the morning can leave us hyper-sensitive to rudeness later in the day, even perceiving rudeness, criticism or sarcasm where none was intended.

And rudeness affects our judgment and resiliency.

Test subjects were shown to not rest as well or to think as clearly or creatively after exposure to rudeness.

In one controlled study done in Tel Aviv, physicians did a mock training surgery on an infant under the supervision of an American doctor via Skype.

In one case, the American doctor just gave basic instructions and minimal feedback.

In the other case, the American doctor was rude and insulting, starting the session by dismissively saying that the Israeli medical system is subpar and that its doctors are inadequately trained.

Now listen to these results: doctors who were insulted were five times less effective than the other group.

They miscommunicated with each other, they picked up the wrong instruments, they fixated on the original diagnosis after new facts were introduced mid-surgery, and they failed to properly resuscitate.

Other research shows doctors being less effective with their next five patients after a particularly rude encounter ... so always say "please" and "thank you" to your doctor!

Other studies have looked at why being exposed to one-sided cell phone conversations is so disruptive – a ubiquitous form of rudeness these days.

Researchers say that overhearing cell phone conversations is so intrusive because humans are natural story tellers, so our brains can't help but fill-in the silent side of the conversation.

We get sucked in and engaged in a story we can't control by making up what it is all about.

This breaks our rhythm and imposes the partially heard conversation into our consciousness – one of the reasons that some people become so angered when people talk on cell phones in inappropriate places.

It turns out that there is a physiological basis for all this.

Brain scans show how rudeness affects the frontal lobes of our brains, which is the executive center for our higher functions.

As that part of our brain is compromised, our judgement and self-control diminish.

This also partially accounts for why rudeness and loud noises diminish our acts of compassion.

Yes, we are less likely to do simple acts of compassion – like helping an elderly woman pick-up groceries spilled from her shopping bag – if we are exposed to loud noise.

Why this rise in rudeness?

A partial explanation is that rudeness is rewarded in our culture because we've come to believe that it is a sign of strength and therefore that it helps people succeed.

Modern politicians rant and name call.

Journalists who shout the loudest get the most airtime, regardless of what they have to say.

TV hosts interrupt and belittle guests.

Movie and book reviews that use the harshest language and get the most angered responses receive the highest ranking in Google.

And rudeness is being interpreted as personal authenticity.

Now the phrase, “I’m just being honest” or “This is just how I feel” gives people license to say almost anything, no matter how offensive or ill-informed it might be.

The culture of rudeness has become the atmosphere in which we live.

So how do we faithfully live and flourish within this culture?

Ephesians 4:17-18 is blunt about how those baptized in Christ are to shed the dominant culture:

*And so I insist—and God backs me up on this—that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They’ve refused for so long to deal with God that they’ve lost touch not only with God but with reality itself. They can’t think straight anymore.*

As I was thinking about this, I heard about an app being developed to help physicians inoculate themselves against rude colleagues and patients.

Yes, there’s an app for everything, and yes, the level of rudeness has risen to the point that someone can make money from an app that inoculates users from its destructive effects.

I gather that the app is some kind of game that stimulates users’ frontal lobes so that they are prepared for the rudeness and negativity they’re bound to encounter.

But we don’t need an iPhone app to fortify ourselves from the assault of our culture.

Paul wrote that humility and compassion can replace anger, deceit and unwholesome talk because Christ will renew our minds.

Romans 12:2 *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Just as rudeness is a learned behavior, so are kindness and encouragement, and they are learned and reinforced in the community of Christ.

Rudeness is contagious, and so is encouragement.

That's why so many speak of our church as a healing place, a sanctuary of refuge where we feel fortified for the week ahead.

This health needs to be protected and nurtured because it is an alternative to the forces out there that would pull us down, discourage us, and have us sink to the lowest standards of behavior.

We give our time, money and talents to the church, and in return we receive life, and spread that promise to others.

And we know that regular prayer and meditation – even a few minutes a day – reorients our minds.

In fact, regular prayer and meditation strengthen the centers of the frontal lobes, the very same parts of our brains that are assaulted by the rudeness and aggression that have become so prevalent.

Taking time to pray in the morning is like the orchestra that tunes before the concert.

If we want peace and health for ourselves, we have to fight for it.

It doesn't just happen on its own.

But in this, Christ is our partner.

We begin our day with prayer, with meditating on scripture.

We strive to be humble and encouraging to everyone we meet.

We serve and protect our community.

As I said earlier, travelers passing through ancient Ephesus would be familiar with other cultures' lists of virtues and vices.

But Paul's message is rooted in the transformative meaning of baptism and life in the church: stripping off the old stained clothing and entering into the Christian community that shares Christ's healing power and a common goal of becoming more like God.

Paul concludes this section with this promise:

*Ephesians 5:1 Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love.*