

We Hear a Lot About Being Kind to Those Outside the Church: How Can We be Kind to Those Inside the Church?

Fifth in the series "Questions from the Floor"

[Ephesians 4: 25–32](#)

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Prayer: We yearn to hear your call, O God, yet we are afraid to hear, for it just might set us on a journey we fear and crave, we want and dread in all our double-mindedness. So reach us with your single-mindedness that we may praise and trust you with all our heart, mind, and strength, and thus love one another. Amen.

Today's question from the floor is actually a composite of several questions that have been suggested to me, both in an e-mail, but also in any number of conversations I have had with some of you through the years. Most recently person, a long time, very devoted member called me to say that it was hard to put in writing these thoughts but wanted to share some impressions. This person was strongly supportive of all we do for the community, and proud of our church in so many ways; loved the worship and children's and adult's programs and outreach programs, but began to notice how easy it is in a church our size to feel "out of it;" how there certainly were perceptions of various cliques, especially if you don't "fit the mold;" and how difficult it can be at times to really feel a part of the one body we often call the Idlewild family. "Is there anyway you could address this in a sermon?" this dear soul asked.

What a wonderful honesty this person had, because it was asked not in anger, but in a deep and clear vision of what the church is called to be. Yes, you do hear a lot about Idlewild's unique role in this community through the years from this pulpit. Yes, the more I read and study and pray over scriptures, the more I am convicted that God calls us to address head on the sufferings of the world. In so doing, *we* just might find God and be transformed.

But this person helped remind me once again to see that if we open our eyes and ears and hearts to those that are sitting next to us in the pews, or sitting across the table at a committee meeting, or in a children's church school class, or at a Wednesday night dinner, we just might find God *here* and be transformed as well!

It is not easy. In some ways its easier to come here on Thursday evening and serve a meal to our homeless friends, talk with them a while, and go home than it is to risk staying connected with those we see every week, sometimes several times a week, especially in a church with so much incredible diversity. Yes, diversity! No, we don't have the kind of racial or ethnic diversity we would like, but it would be hard to find any Christian gathering in Shelby County that is more diverse than Idlewild.

Think of it: We have people with bumper stickers that say "Midtown is Memphis" and people who travel over an hour to get here.

We have members who are 3rd, 4th, 5th generation Memphis and Idlewild and feel right at home here, and members who have recently moved here and wonder what in the world they are doing in Memphis.

We have folks who are quite comfortable economically, not a financial worry in the world; we have others who live from paycheck to paycheck, and still others who wish they had a regular paycheck.

We have women who stay at home with their children, and women who would love to, but have to work outside the home to make ends meet; still others who feel a call to work outside the home. Sometimes there is some tension between them.

We have here at Idlewild some dear deeply evangelical Christians whose passion is their personal Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; and others who find inspiration in people like Bishop Spong and Marcus Borg and other more liberal, even radical Christians whose call is to social justice.

We have people who are strong supporters of the war effort in Iraq, and others who have deep reservations about it.

We have single, divorced, widowed, gay, straight, and married members.

We have young people who go to public school, some who go to private school, some who go to Catholic school.

We have a balance of all ages here. We found out recently that the largest age group was in the 26–45 age bracket, and all the other age brackets were virtually the same.

We have people who, because of their belief in the authority of scripture, have some problems with ordaining gays and lesbians to office in the church; and we have others, who, because of their belief in the authority of scripture, have some problems with excluding some of God's children from church leadership solely on the basis of sexual orientation.

I won't even touch the political diversity, except to relate to you two true experiences I had this summer. At one point someone came into my office and said "I feel as though I have to be careful about what I say at Idlewild because there are so many liberal Democrats." Then two days later (literally) someone shared with me, "You know, Steve, sometimes I feel I have to be careful about what I say at church because there are so many conservative Republicans."

Now *you* try to be a pastor of this group! Suffice it to say that I'd rather you not compare my picture in the pictorial directory taken four years ago (where there was nary a gray hair!) with the picture to be taken in a few weeks!!

But this question that was asked by that dear soul, and which has been echoed by several of you, "How can we be kind to one another?" is one of the most important questions that was raised, because the way we treat each other here, especially in the midst of all of our wonderful God-given diversity, goes beyond mere civility, that public smile that hides a private sneer; it goes beyond good manners and politeness, which are both very important. But the way we treat each other here in the church has cosmic implications. We are called to something more than civility.¹

First of all, we are called to confession. I remember a church in downtown Atlanta, right on the corner of a major intersection, and over the door way was a sign: "The Perfect Church." Well, once I got to know a few of the members I found out that it wasn't the perfect church. There's no such thing this side of eternity. The fact is we in the church have fallen short of the glory of God. We have not loved one another as God first loved us. When we take a look at Jesus' words as he was saying goodbye to his disciples we know we aren't what we ought to be:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. If you love one another.” We hear that, and we are called to confession.

We know that the early church wasn't the perfect church either. Paul knew that at times the church members at Corinth were not patient and kind; they were envious, boastful, arrogant and rude. They did insist on their own way, rejoiced in the wrong, not in the right.

But there are also writings that give us a clue how far we have come. One pagan Roman, writing back to the emperor, wrote “See how these Christians love one another!”

Several centuries later Cyprian wrote a letter to a friend:

“This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas, in amphitheaters men even murder to please the applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is a really bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this simple life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians—and I am one of them.”²

Could that be written today? “A quiet and holy people...a joy...overcome the world? We are called to confession.

Secondly, in the very way we treat each other, we are bearing witness to our society. I have to admit that I've always had a hard time with people who equate being Christian with “being nice.” Now, hopefully, we *are* nice, but the Christian life entails more than just being nice. The most extreme example I have heard was a man's description of his dog. She never growled at anyone, he said. She never even barked. When she wanted to go for a walk, she gently nudged her master's arm. He summed up the dog by saying, “Put it this way: in every way she was a Christian dog.” Now, I've known some mighty nice dogs in my time, but they were all heathens and happy to be so. I guess I never expected more from a dog. But it wasn't enough for this dog to be nice; it had to be Christian.

I shudder when the Christian life is reduced to mere niceties. For the Christian life is more than just being kind to one another, but it is not less. When you begin to think about our society and how increasingly our relationships are ruled by self-interest, downright rudeness, and insensitivity, kindness to one another is a form of witness in and of itself...to that very society! Paul knew, because he had experienced, the hate and terror of his day. He knew that when the pressures grew, there would be a tendency to adopt the same behaviors in the church that society used. And so after exhorting his friends to put away bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, he simply said, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven you.”

But in the church, we are called to go deeper than kindness. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he said that “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” That word “endure” can mean “to last,” but it can also mean “to put with a lot.” Love lasts precisely because it puts up with a lot. Forbearance goes deeper than civility or niceness, both of which have to do with a thin crust of appearances. Relationships that are “nice” or “civil” can remain shallow. But forbearance risks going deeper.

I have a friend, Martin Copenhaver, who is a UCC minister who asked his congregation once: “Is there someone in this church you can’t stand? Is there someone who has betrayed you, or disappointed you, or who offends you, or angers you: someone you don’t want to have anything more to do with, or someone who just grates on you? If there is not yet such a person here for you,” he said, “then that is an indication that you need to draw closer, because it is when we have encountered people that we would normally not choose to associate with—it is then that we have a chance to become more than just another pleasant gathering of congenial people. It is then that we have a chance to be a church.”

Martin said that following that sermon, a relatively new member of the congregation said to him, “Gee, I don’t think that sermon was addressed to me because there’s no one here in this church like that for me.” He then said that recently, after she had been around a little longer, she said to him, “remember that sermon I told you I couldn’t relate to? Well, I think I get it now.” “Good,” he said. “Now God can do something with you.”³ You see, it is only when we go beyond the surface and recognize our deep differences and wild diversity that God has given us, that God can do something *wonderful* with us all. Instead of being just a bunch of nice people, we have a chance to be the church!

Though we overuse the term “church family,” the term is appropriate when we consider that the church, like the family, is a milieu in which we can learn to live with people we did not choose. We’ve been called to be here, and we’re stuck with each other! And when we love the ones we are stuck with, we are reminded of a God who is stuck with us all.

It is that God who calls us beyond confession, beyond kindness, even beyond perseverance, to reconciliation. Talk about being a witness to the world! Our world, our nation, our denomination is so fragmented and divided right now that reconciliation may seem a distant possibility. *But we should never lose sight of it!* We can never be true to our call if we are content to fall short of it.

What we do here in the church, how we treat each other here in the church has cosmic consequences, because if we are going to meet God, if we are going to serve Christ, it will be here, in a real, live church, in a real, live world among people who want to love each other, but so often find it so difficult to do so. It’s difficult, but it is not impossible, because we worship a God who is with us, a God who was willing to get down and dirty in the gritty places where we actually live. A God who stays connected to us, enabling us to stay connected with one another.

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor of a small Hispanic and African-American church in the south Bronx. She started visiting Felipe in the hospital after he was severely injured while working at the World Trade Centers on 9/11. He wasn’t a member of a CPA firm or a brokerage firm or anything like that. He kept the vending machines full of sodas and candy. After the attack, his wife Elba joined with thousands in making the rounds of hospitals with his picture, showing the proud immigrant with his arms around his two children whom he adored, hoping against hope to find him alive.

She finally did, miraculously, but barely. Alive, but covered with burns, so much so that it was decided that it would not be wise for his children to see him. He had only the blackened remains of one ear showing, but the nurses told Heidi they believed he could hear. So she got a

tape recorder and took it to Felipe's two children. 10 year old Lionel knew exactly what to say: "I miss you, Daddy. I wish this never had to happen. I want you to come home. I love you, Daddy." But five year old Rosalina was mute. She didn't know what to say to this little gray box. But Heidi was desperate to capture something for Felipe. "Do you like to sing?" she asked Rosalina. The girl smiled as Heidi turned on the recorder and Rosalina sang "a.b.c.d.e.f.g..."

Heidi took it to the hospital and played it every day, over and over. She also read some psalms and prayed some prayers, but if anything could get through the morphine and pain, it would be the voices of his children.

At the end of the second week, after much of the dead skin had finally been removed, Heidi played the tape one more time and she saw Felipe, eyes still shut, trying to speak. She watched two words take shape on lips so fragile that they bled from the effort: "*thank...you.*"

Heidi wrote: "Connection is everything. Relationship to God and to each other is life itself."⁴

Connection is everything. We are called to meet one another at the deepest levels, levels at which we discover that mere congeniality does not suffice. Why? Because we deal with issues of life and death. Much is at stake.

And I believe that God has called us here....to Idlewild...to experience, yes, kindness, tender-heartedness, niceness, but something larger, far more exciting, more challenging. And that is the connection with the God who has gathered us all into community and has given us the gift of reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

So be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. For in relating fully and authentically to one another, you just might find life itself and be *the church!*

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¹ Martin Copenhaver, "Enduring All things, Even Each Other," *Congregations*, Spring, 2004, p. 24.

² Cyprian, a Christian martyr, was bishop of Carthage from AD 248-258. *The Histories*.

³ Copenhaver, op.cit. p. 25.

⁴ Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*. Boston: Beacon press, 2003, p. xvi-xvii.

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Ephesians 4:25–32

25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. **26** Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, **27** and do not make room for the devil. **28** Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. **29** Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. **31** Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, **32** and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

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