

Along the Way Oct.25 A Plea for Civility

“When you get to the endzone, act like you have been there before.” —Vince Lombardi

My dad is a big fan of football and of Vince Lombardi. As a child, I played a lot of football with my siblings and my Dad. It was the place to learn some of life’s lessons, especially about being a good sport. We were to conduct ourselves with both dignity and restraint, especially if we made a touchdown. We were to be humble, respectful and magnanimous. We were to be civil. It was a good life lesson that was reinforced by Sunday School.

We don’t need to walk through the whole Bible to convince us that civility should be part of our spiritual practice. In Galatians 5, we read: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” While civility is not specifically mentioned, I believe words like forbearance (patience), gentleness, and self-control suggest civility is among the fruits of the Spirit. Civility involves more than ordinary politeness. It models Jesus’ openness and welcome toward all, even his enemies. It’s also a strategy that allows its practitioners to claim the moral high ground in pursuing a vision of justice.

Civility does not mean we have to befriend everyone we meet or forfeit our convictions. Rather, it means caring deeply about our *civitas* (our people) because God cares so deeply for us. We know that we don’t always get it right. One does not have to believe in original sin to know that humans hurt each other. Whether hurtful behavior stems from fear, anger or hate, it is poison for our souls. Maybe it starts with the way we view ourselves: lack of self-respect, shortage of dignity, no sense of restraint, sore losers and ugly winners. If we act that way ourselves, it soon becomes part of the way we treat others.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg has said: “You can disagree without being disagreeable.” It’s all about behavior. To be civil is to speak from a place of humility. To keep gossip, shame and blame from coming from our lips. To be civil is to voice open, non-defensive dialogue and forego anxiety and worry.

In our current climate, it feels like it has been a while, but when we get back to that place of civility, it might feel like familiar turf. And we might be able to act, as Lombardi counseled, like we’ve been there before.

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