

A Culture of Rudeness and Anger

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In case you haven't noticed, rudeness is in. Not that it was ever completely out, but there seems to be a renewed vigor of in your face, tell it like it is, take no prisoners, let it all hang out, vent your spleen, get out of my way candor.

Karen Heller, a *Philadelphia Enquirer* columnist, recently summarized the trend:

"Indignation isn't confined to large issues; miniscule infractions set it off. We're impatient and angry, every slight perceived as a conspiracy. Each day brings fresh indignation. Hooked on speed, people harrumph about waiting in short lines. Drivers behave as though other vehicles are the enemy. Someone cuts you off and it's the thrown gauntlet welcoming a road duel, an assault on one's independence – or worse ...

We've filled our daily lives with enemies everywhere, real and perceived, from menacing dictators to the other political party to the guy behind us on the expressway riding our tail.

Television thrives on loutish behavior and dismissal, being booted off the island, the stage, out of the boardroom. It's humiliation as theater, snarkiness as creativity. The nastier the terminator, the brighter his astral burn."

We do live in a world that inconveniences, threatens and depersonalizes us on every hand. Such rudeness and incivility in the public arena is corrosive; it tends to lower our resistance to behaving in kind. The knee jerk response is to assert ourselves, stake out our ground and show our adversaries that we can't be pushed around. Fight fire with fire, right?

Wrong. The standard of attitude and behavior to which a Christian is called is higher than the level of treatment we receive from others. Jesus raised the bar when He said: "*Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets*" (Mt 7:12). In describing a husband's treatment of his wife, Paul said, "*For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church*" (Eph 5:29). Normal people have regard for their own comfort and well-being. And it is not so difficult to treat other *normal* people with respect and courtesy. Ah, but what about my abnormal fellow man who abuses me without cause? What is my motive to treat the undeserving as I wish to be treated?

First, we are challenged at this point on how much we really believe in God's word. God declares that vengeance belongs to Him and He'll take care of the wicked (Rom 12:19). Our job is to feed our enemy and give him a drink; i.e., treat him as we would wish to be treated (Rom 12:20). This, we understand, was the way of Jesus toward Malchus (Lk 22:50-51), His executioners (Lk 23:34), yea, even all of us who have shown Him contempt and disrespect. Jesus, "*when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously*" (1 Pet 2:23). Do we believe in God enough to do our duty and let Him handle the rest?

Secondly, in the flush of retributive anger, we are challenged regarding our wisdom. When Peter hacked off Malchus' ear, Jesus rebuked him: "*Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword*" (Mt 26:52). We escalate volatility when we retaliate in kind; we contribute to the cycle of violence; we weaken our own defenses against carnal response; we set the wrong example for our children and we endanger ourselves through poor judgment or high blood pressure. Our own inconsideration and rudeness poisons the public arena regardless of the rationalization we attach to it.

Ms. Heller continues: "There are fewer rewards for civility, and manners have completely evaporated. I'm telling you, e-mail and voice mail, aired attacks and flipped birds at strangers are easy, mindless and cowardly. It's kindness that takes work."

But it is work that will receive due reward from smiling, surprised faces of our fellow man and a nod of approval from our God who is watching to see what we will do. "*But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Highest ...*" (Lk 6:35).