

Sensitive Subjects
9/25/05

Many of you own a computer. For those who don't, you will still understand what I am saying. There is a breed of individual out there that forwards to friends and acquaintances those things they receive that they enjoy reading and are in basic agreement with. And that breed includes, of course, most of us! Through e-mail, I receive a variety of mailings each day from people who must think I live in a vacuum. Jokes, of course; especially religious ones are plentiful. I receive updates concerning the Red Sox; people seeming to forget that I grew up outside Boston. And there are those who attach pleasant material, such as is written by Ann Landers or Robert Fulghum. The other day I was handed "12 Golden Rules for Living," "The Ten Commandments of How to Get Along with People" and portions of "What I Learned in Kindergarten." All very nice. Sweet stuff! All off the Internet. I may use it in church someday.

Then there are those who must figure I am out of touch with not only what is happening in the world, but that they can influence my opinions also. One person forwards to me all sorts of liberal chatter concerning the war in Iraq, the nomination of a Supreme Court Justice and weather maps showing the eye of Hurricane Rita, as if I hadn't watched the weather in the last month. Another friend in Pennsylvania forwards to me what his church and Conference are doing for Tsunami Relief. Requests for money; as if I will immediately send a check. I already receive news and requests from both New Hampshire and Maine Conferences so I doubt I will respond to requests from the Keystone State.

Even if you are without a computer, you still understand this. People call you over the phone and do the very same thing, recounting events you are well aware of. We walk in the downtown and find ourselves listening politely while others share their opinions or complaints. All this information, all this opinion - we sift through it. Some interests us, but we toss most of it. And perhaps we forward or pass on what we find most interesting.

Most of what comes our way is pretty innocuous. That is especially true of the emails I receive from one such person, a dear lady in her 80's. She sends all sorts of emails that tell cute stories or present pleasant pictures. Her latest two are entitled, "God Spilled the Paint" and "An Old Friendly Trio." You can guess what they are about. Lots of what she forwards have groupings of kittens and puppies gathered together so that you have to smile. Many end with religious quotations about God or the love of Jesus. I enjoy them, some more than others.

Which is why I was really stunned when, a couple of weeks ago, she sent me one that really slammed the Muslims. It was as if I was on the phone with a friend, that person rehashing current events while I, every now and then mumble "aha aha" to show I am still there. When something really awkward strikes. Hits a non-funny bone and makes me cringe.

This email...let me describe it. A 37 cent postage stamp is pictured at the top. It is a holiday stamp with Muslim handwriting on it. Below it reads: "They don't even believe in Christ and they are getting their own Christmas Stamp. But don't dream of posting the Ten Commandments on Federal Property! Remember the Muslim Bombing of Pan Am Flight 103; Remember the Muslim bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993; Remember the Muslim bombing of the marine barracks in Lebanon" It continued as a litany of destructive acts - an account of the bombings by Muslims throughout the world. "Remember to adamantly and vocally boycott this postage stamp. To purchase this stamp would be a slap in the face to all patriotic Americans who died at the hands of those whom this stamp honors."

To me this was a pretty big blow. It seemed to go far beyond either the liberal or the conservative leanings I tend to receive in emails. The sentiment was nasty and I found the words hateful, particularly disarming to me as it came from a woman I have always respected for being kind and compassionate. My

immediate inclination was to write back, to chastise or challenge her for what she had sent. But being less rash and brash a man than I once was, I thought it best to sit on it a day or two. Many of you perhaps think me to be proactive, but I have become very deliberate of late. Ask Linda. For two years now I have basically been hand feeding our computer printer, which most often malfunctions at ten PM on a Saturday evening when I want my sermon printed. A week ago we finally bought a new printer. And what did I say a few days later, "If I had known it could be this easy, I would have brought a new one long ago."

So I deliberated, something I have obviously become very proficient at. Had this woman gone off the deep end? Would I offend her by sending a criticism? She is mid-eighties now and has an ailing husband. I don't want to distress her. But the material was so objectionable. I believe so strongly in diversity and freedom of religion. I know terrorists are frightening but how can you condemn a whole people. And who else is reading such stuff and being influenced by it! I tried to weigh matters objectively.

I wrote her back. Trying to suppress my deep chagrin ...I inserted my opinion in a middle paragraph, paying compliments in the surrounding letter so she would know I still liked her. First, I congratulated her on reaching another milestone – her 63rd wedding anniversary in October. I ended with the hope that things were going well in her church. In between I wrote, "I Enjoy your forwards of emails but have to say the one on the Muslim postage stamp was a bit too much. Don't know where you got it but I thought it was disrespectful of the Muslim tradition. Extremists are bad in any religion; we have had our share in Christianity too. America has always prided itself on diversity and I hope that is always the case." Pretty short and sweet, I thought. Basically blamed it on someone else; made her the forwarder of a forward. I hoped that she would not feel too bad.

Before I share her response, try to recall situations you have been in with family, friends or co-workers when that awkward moment hits. A crude remark, an off color story or joke, a racist statement. A banker out of my past used to tell jokes that were clearly racist. Not wanting to alienate I always responded with a disgruntled look, saying, "Not something I can really tell in church." I have never liked confrontation much. I am not very courageous face to face! In reality, few of us are very comfortable handling such matters. Deliberation is always better than a stormy tirade; that I know. But you don't want to imply that you are in agreement either. Sensitive issues can cause quite a bit of consternation, even soul searching.

The 85 year old woman replied quickly. Maybe at that age I won't deliberate either! "Hi Peter, I hear you loud and clear. A minister friend sent it to me and I sent it [tongue in cheek] to you. Your response was that you were offended as I was. I thought I was the odd one. I sent it to several close friends and only two jumped back in the manner you did. Pretty interesting, isn't it? Supposedly the United States was founded so people could worship as they saw fit. We must respect others even if we do not agree. I live next door to Jehovah's Witnesses and they are great friends and neighbors. It doesn't matter that they have different beliefs. However I did rebel when she tried to convert me but explained I respect her decisions and to please repay the compliment and let me stay this way."

So where does this leave us? Let me make three suggestions. First, we had best heed the example of Jesus. When we find ourselves in awkward and sensitive situations, it would behoove us to consider first where the other person is coming from. So many people today live out of some sort of fear. They react to things that bother and disturb them. Though the example I offered this morning is rather insignificant in the scope of things, it should be a reminder of this. People's thinking, unfortunately, has changed in this age of Terrorist Activity. This email could have reflected deeply held beliefs about this country and the harm that has been inflicted upon our world. The fear of losing one's freedom can be a tremendous burden. And what if the writer had lost a loved one or known someone who has been injured in the line of duty.

We may not agree with a person but we should always try to respect where their feeling come from. When we react, it often serves our own needs. The need we have to pontificate or judge! But don't forget

the needs of the other. Jesus would ask us to do this, at the very least. Empathy and compassion is certainly a more Christian approach than to scold or indict.

However, and the second point, which is certainly important to keep in mind in this age of access and information - we don't necessarily have to accept or believe every letter, opinion or email we receive. Nor do we have to pass it on to others if we disagree with the content. I had finally written this woman and shared my feelings with her. Because she is a person that people respect, others may have thought she was encouraging them to believe as she did; that she held certain truths and they were now enlightened. To send this out, as she wrote, with "tongue in cheek" may have been a poor strategy. How much better it would have been if she had gone back to the source to say that she was in basic disagreement of the e-mail's premise. Just because the sender was a clergy person doesn't mean he should have escaped the reprimand. Some of my best learning's have come from people who knew the Pastor could benefit from a healthier understanding of the issues!

Remember: There is a lot of "stuff" floating around out there. Need I say just two words – "talk radio" – to rest my case? Let's all try to discern what is faithful and just and not simply accept everything as truth. Because much of it is suspect!

Finally, because I believe so strongly in our country's grounding in the freedom of religion, it's time to wake up and see this country for what it is – a pluralistic society of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Certainly the Judeo-Christian faith was precious to the founding of this land, but our "Forefathers" had the wisdom to challenge people to live under the umbrella of tolerance and the acceptance of the beliefs of others. Anything that smacks of a particular religion being in control or a particular religion being denied full privilege is anti-American.

In this day and age, we should take pride in our chosen faith – believing in the authority of Jesus Christ, who we accept as Lord. No one can take our beliefs away from us, nor should we denigrate those who have chosen differently. In fact, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could actually find the common ground which allows for the celebration of all faiths and the cooperation of all peoples. Certainly the principles of our American freedom are intended to unite and not divide us.

Then again, maybe the smartest thing for us to do would be to emulate Brother Roger, founder of the Taize Religious Community in France who believed staunchly in ecumenical relationships. In his 90's, he was recently murdered, ironically and sadly while at worship. Roger found unity in the act of prayer, saying that "The simple desire for God is already the beginning of faith...All of us have doubts, but our deepest desire is to listen to the Christ, who whispers in our hearts....The more we make our own prayer...the more we are led to love and express it in our life." (The Christian Century, Sept.20, 2005) Perhaps, the best course, in this world of excess information, remains to listen...to be in prayer...to be led not by the word of others so much as the whisper of God.