

Speaking Peace
Matthew 10:5-14
June 21, 2020

Among the residents of Santa Rosa are the Peanuts gang, created by Charles Schultz. We're familiar with Lucy's seeming disdain for Charlie Brown. Every year she pulls the football trick. Just as he is about to kick the football, Lucy pulls it away and Charlie Brown flies into the air before falling down and bruising his ego.

Lucy finds it quite natural to call Charlie Brown a "blockhead," "dumb," or "weak." She delivers her insults with great ease, showing no emotion, and then moving on with whatever she was doing. When Charlie Brown fails at something, Lucy is quick to point it out. In one series of strips, Lucy puts all of Charlie Brown's faults on slides and illustrates them by category: his physical faults, personality faults, inherited faults, and most damaging faults, leaving poor Charlie Brown feeling miserable for days. Then Lucy has the audacity of sending Charlie Brown a bill in the amount of \$143 for her services!ⁱ

Earlier this year at the National Prayer Breakfast, Arthur Brooks shared his understanding of contempt as "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another."ⁱⁱ In so much of American society, we witness people treating one another as worthless, making our fights brutal and leaving cooperation impossible. How can we move beyond the combustible tension that is dividing our nation? What is our role as followers of Christ in speaking to this growing divide?

In today's scripture, Jesus is sending his twelve disciples out with authority to proclaim the good news of God's reign, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. But before this commissioning, Jesus seems to set up his own divide when he instructs them to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Don't go near the Gentiles and don't walk into a Samaritan town. We want to protest, "Wait a minute Jesus, we thought you taught us to love our neighbor, all our neighbors, and to love our enemies. So what's up?" Scholars consider this statement to be an editorial addition by the author of Matthew's gospel, written later in the first century, long after Jesus' death. At the time of Jesus, there was not yet a mission to the Gentiles. Jesus was about transforming his own religion of Judaism, and so he started with his own people. After the resurrection, Matthew's gospel records Jesus' great Commission to go to "all the nations." The church's Gentile mission began after Easter. He was not setting up a divide. The historical Jesus focused his mission primarily on the people of Israel; later the disciples shared the gospel with Gentiles.

Jesus instructs the disciples to travel lightly and to depend on the hospitality of others and the providence of God. Hospitality is a sacred obligation in the Mediterranean world. There is more to hospitality than meeting the physical and material needs of others. Hospitality is also a matter of opening one's heart and mind to make space to welcome and meet another human being.

The initial message the disciples are to offer is peace. In the Hebraic understanding of shalom, peace, wholeness is the joining together of opposites. Shalom brings together even people who disagree so that each will listen deeply to the "other" side. It is often the people with whom we disagree who have the greatest gift for us – the potential for wholeness. Jesus

encourages us to speak peace to those who offer hospitality and even to those who respond with hostility. Don't return a curse for a curse, simply walk away and shake the dust off your sandals.

Our scripture as well as principles of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication offer us some guidance for crossing the divide and offering hospitality to those with differing perspectives. First, Jesus starts where people are. He begins with his own people before his movement grows. Powerful Non-Defensive Communication also suggests that we "Meet the other person where they're at, not where you *wish* they were at."ⁱⁱⁱ

It begins with curiosity, which is an antidote to contempt.^{iv} Contempt arises from a highly defensive place of know-it-all superiority. It's like Lucy implying that from her psychiatrist's booth she is qualified to point out all Charlie Brown's faults and stomp all over him. In contrast, curiosity is an innocent desire to understand where the other person is coming from. It is a stance of gathering information in order to understand. A sincere question, asked with humility, can be very disarming. An adversarial or arrogant question causes the other person's defenses to go up. Their brain turns off, and they will either fight you or withdraw.^v

The goal of curiosity questions is not to persuade someone to change their minds. It is to seek to understand where the other person is coming from. "The best [curiosity] questions are formed by an *open* mind, free of a persuasive agenda."^{vi} It requires listening to understand. Often when we listen, we're not paying full attention to the other person; we're already preparing our response, even our defense. Truly meeting a person where they are requires that we temporarily set aside our own agenda and engage with humility and openness. It involves offering a sincere space of hospitality in which we listen.

Curiosity questions should be specific, but posed in a nonjudgmental, non-argumentative way. It is a matter of probing for why they feel as they do. Curiosity is based in a genuine desire to listen to the experiences that have shaped their perspective. Here are a few examples of curiosity questions:

What do you see as some of the root causes driving immigration?^{vii}

When people say "black lives matter," does it feel to you like they're saying that white lives don't matter?^{viii}

Non-defensive questions can dissolve the walls between two people with opposing viewpoints. If people are genuinely curious, they can stimulate new insights for one another.^{ix}

A first step to crossing the divide is to meet people where they are with genuine curiosity seeking to understand where they are coming from.

Hospitality of the heart continues as we offer empathy. Marshall Rosenberg says, "Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing."^x It is a matter of presence, of giving one's full attention to another's suffering. We listen for what people are feeling and needing.

Upon hearing another's story or perspective, we are often quick to jump into giving advice or reassurance or telling our own story, sometimes in a "one-upmanship" fashion. In these ways, we shift the attention to ourselves, and even to our superior status.

Empathy stays with the conversation partner. Erica Etelson says that, "Empathy is the act of taking the other person's perspective, stepping into their shoes, and trying to understand what they are feeling. Empathy is not agreement or compromise. You can empathize with the

feelings and experiences underlying someone’s opinions without liking or agreeing with those opinions.”^{xi}

Empathy deepens a relationship. It cultivates fertile ground for sharing our own perspective when the time is right. As this series continues, we’ll share ideas for presenting our position with others.

Today we take our cues for approaching civil dialogue with someone who sees things differently than we do. We meet them where they are. Unlike Lucy who badgers Charlie Brown by enumerating and illustrating his every fault, we prepare ourselves to listen with curiosity and genuinely seek to understand where they are coming from. Such listening leads to empathy and a respectful understanding of another’s experience. It is offering hospitality of heart, providing a safe space in which people can share of their hurts and longings, their pain and dreams.

I invite you to think of someone with whom you’ve had differences of opinion. How do you feel about that person? If you’re feeling contempt or anger, pray to cultivate a spirit of curiosity about that person, where they are coming from, what makes them tick. If you have an opportunity to approach that person, pray for an open mind and a heart of hospitality, that you might meet them where they are and listen deeply to understand. These personal interactions are the starting place to embolden our nation to conquer the crisis of contempt.

In these difficult days, be gentle with yourselves, and with one another.

ⁱ https://peanuts.fandom.com/wiki/January_1964_comic_strips;
https://peanuts.fandom.com/wiki/February_1964_comic_strips

ⁱⁱ Arthur C. Brooks, “America’s Crisis of Contempt,” *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/07/arthur-brooks-national-prayer-breakfast-speech/?arc404=true>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Erica Etelson, *Beyond Contempt: How Liberals Can Communicate Across the Great Divide* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2020), p. 135.

^{iv} Ibid, p. 114.

^v Ibid, p. 116.

^{vi} Ibid, p. 116.

^{vii} Ibid, p. 119.

^{viii} Ibid, p. 120.

^{ix} Ibid, p. 124.

^x Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D., *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2003), p. 91.

^{xi} Etelson, p. 134.