Civility is fraught. Jokes are better.

A well-placed wisecrack can pull the mighty down from their thrones.

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My history of writing on politics has mostly been anything but civil. Since 2003, I've left the Internet littered with snark, invective, polemic, and what is charmingly known as *rabies theologorum*. It's a dubious record, often written in a profane vocabulary. It's cost me a pulpit and more than a few friends.

Please, for the love of God, don't rush out and look it up.

So on paper—or at least by the cold light of pixels on the screen—I should be the last person to write about civility. Yet civility, as it happens, is an important subject in these divided days of America. For Christians, the conversation quickly boils down to a couple of central questions: How much civility do Christians owe to other citizens in our democracy? And how do we emulate Jesus in the midst of a broken political system?

Before we can answer those questions, we have to tackle another: What is civility, anyway? With partisans offering up a variety of definitions, it can be a tough concept to pin down. Defenders of the Trump administration have the most straightforward take: not surprisingly, they don't like being called fascists or racists, or even being told that they benefit from systems that are. They also believe that confronting public officials in daily life is offensive, even threatening. After a Virginia restaurant denied service to White House press secretary Sarah Sanders, Fox News ran days' worth of continuous coverage.

When it comes to Trump's opponents, things get messier and more interesting. Like Tolstoy's unhappy families, each seems to define civility in their own way. Some are more in favor of it than others.

One stream of thought connects civility with Jesus' work of healing the divisions of the world. Take, for example, the religion scholar and popular writer Diana Butler Bass. Bass suggested on Twitter that the restaurant owner might have taken Sanders aside and indicated that she would welcome her party with the sort of generous hospitality Sanders's employer evidently lacks. Citing Paul's admonition to "heap burning coals" on an enemy's head by treating them with kindness, Bass described her suggestion as a way to "'shame' with love—it isn't 'shaming' in the way we think about about shame. It is a way to show that actions are evil by treating those who are doing wrong as human beings."

For Bass, civility involves more than ordinary politeness. It models in the civic sphere Jesus' openness and welcome toward even his enemies. It's also a political strategy that allows its practitioners to claim the moral high ground in pursuing a vision of justice.

Jason Sisk-Provencio, pastor of the United Church of Christ in San Luis Obispo, California, agrees with Bass, at least in part. Civility, for Sisk-Provencio, is worth doing for its own sake, and for the sake of maintaining one's own sense of humanity.

Whether or not it pays off politically is not as relevant for him.

Sisk-Provencio says the current political landscape makes him aware of “how many temptations there are to not embrace the stranger, and consider them just totally other than us.” He believes Christians are called by their personal identities as disciples to reach across what he calls an “incredible us-versus-them mentality.” He points to the work of reconciliation Christians are given: “It’s not, someone deserves to be treated with civility when they have treated us without civility,” he says. “It’s doing something deliberately because you want a relationship [or] community with someone.”

If some who are not on the Trump team want to overcome hate with love, others seek an ethical balance between relational ministry and bold advocacy for the oppressed. Jesus, after all, reached out to his enemies. But he also stood up for “the least of these,” and he wasn’t exactly shy about it. As another UCC minister—Kate West of Belle Plaine, Iowa—has found, it’s not easy to walk in these both-and shoes. “What I might say is civil, other people might describe as ‘disruptive,’” she says, referring to taking political stands. “It’s hard to find the right balance to be faithful, but not offend. But I would argue that sometimes you need to offend people.”

West serves in a small town where she is the only female pastor in recent memory—and the first pastor to be a Democrat. She is keenly aware of how her words and behavior will be scrutinized. Even attending rallies in a nearby city leaves her nervous about possible repercussions at home. Echoing a common refrain, West says that she has to be careful with social media: “Even though I have my page separate from the church’s account, I have to consider what I post and what I’m saying. People don’t consider how much energy it takes for pastors to filter and think through exactly what they’re saying” so they don’t offend members of their community. “There are days when it’s absolutely exhausting.”

She remains committed, however. As she points out, what is ordinarily considered civil participation in the political process—letter writing, phone calls, protests—sometimes fails to redress issues. At that point, West believes, it’s time to think about some uncivil actions: disobeying laws and risking arrest. “At some point you have to say [that] as a person of faith, and as a Christian in particular, this is where I think God is leading us, and by my faith I am required to move, to do these things.”

Like many others, West thinks the political climate is getting worse. Small towns used to live with political differences, she says. But in 2016, after being spotted at a Democratic caucus in Belle Plaine, she was told by a neighbor that she couldn't be a Christian. "I think people are definitely feeling more bold," she says.

Not everyone is on board with a vision of civility-as-shalom. Given the rise of intolerant voices, particularly from the right, some see civility as a way of avoiding important questions about privilege, control, and justice. They look to Jesus the prophet who railed against "broods of vipers" and "whitened sepulchers," who was unafraid to chase the money changers out of the temple.

Kaitlin Curtice, a Potawatomi Christian author, cautions against ignoring social power dynamics. "Civility has roots in colonization," she says. "Just as Columbus arrived, and those after him, calling indigenous peoples savages, the idea of the 'uncivilized' becoming civilized has continued into our discourse today." Like others, Curtice sees a racial component in calls for civility. "As an indigenous woman," she says, "if I am asked to stay civil within the church, or in spaces where I'm sharing my story, I'm going to understand that as an attempt to silence my voice." She issues a particular warning for the church: "Being civil is often a way for Christians to use the name of God to silence the marginalized and oppress the unwanted."

Curtice suggests a counter-practice. "I think that the role of Christians right now is to listen to the oppressed," she says. "To truly listen, and to act when it's necessary to raise our voices alongside the oppressed." For Curtice, the challenge is not so much to be civil but "to practice the work of fighting injustice through humility. Humility brings everyone low and asks what needs to be done from the ground up."

Mike Galica has thoughts about civility, too. They are not positive. The pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Brigham City, Utah, echoes Curtice: "Civility has been used to silence people," he says. "It's like the conversation people used to have about respect, where some people would use 'respect' to mean 'treat me like a human being,' and other people would use 'respect' to say 'treat me like an authority.'" Having a polite conversation about relatively minor things is easy enough, Galica says. "It's another thing when the subject of the conversation is 'I want all people of a different skin color out of the nation.'"

Indeed, American politics are increasingly centered on questions of race and culture these days, and those questions are usually the ones that spark the most incivility.

The situation presents a familiar quandary: Is it better to address injustice with lovingkindness, straight-up confrontation, or something in the middle? There is a time for each, but I'd like to suggest another option.

In the Gospels, we hear again and again of moments when people who ought to be Jesus' enemies—Jairus, Nicodemus, the centurion—reach out to him in need. He receives them with care and concern. "Jesus was civil to those who were civil to him," says Mike Galica. But, as Galica goes on to say, that's not to say Christians should make themselves doormats. After all, Jesus has plenty of sharp things to say elsewhere about his opponents. And as Kaitlin Curtice reminds us, Christians are obliged to stand up for the dispossessed. But Jesus' ability to connect "across the aisle," as it were, goes to show that despite all the anger, bitterness, and violence, even small connections can be built upon. They can be turned into something wholly unexpected.

The way that often happens is literally funny business. Look at Jesus' interaction with the Syrophoenician woman in Matthew 15, for example. "It's not fair to let the dogs eat the children's dinner," he tells her at first, using racialized language of difference. "Ah, but even the dogs can take the crumbs that fall from the table, no?" she replies. I can't help imagining Jesus responding with a hearty laugh and a "Well played!"

The humor here is not incidental. If certain anthropologists are to be believed, joking and teasing began as ways to defuse tense social situations. That's a fair way to read this story: Jesus tries to turn the woman away with a teasing brush-off rather than a harsher rebuke. She's having none of it, and she punctures the tension with a well-placed joke. Both sides acknowledge the social dividing line that stands between them. But they also join in laughing at its stupid, arbitrary nature. Once they've shared the humor, they are able to establish a new, more productive relationship.

Are Christians called to be models of civility, or can that stance be a form of evasion?

The humility on display in this story is also important. Jesus' interlocutor is willing to play along with his insult for the sake of argument, and he tacitly admits his error by granting the desired healing. Taking a joke is as important as telling one. I make fun of you, you make fun of me. Humor unites when its challenge is accepted—the

challenge to join the game specifically on a level playing field. It's more than just a lame pastor joke to break the ice, and it's more than just funny smack talk. Real humor exposes the ludicrous, the absurd, the ironic. It bursts bubbles—gently, when necessary. Otherwise, it's not really funny.

Humor binds people together even as it humbles them. If, as Kaitlin Curtice says, "civility keeps the privileged in the seat of privilege," then humor pulls them off the throne, down to earth with everybody else. Tribal societies often use humor as a way of keeping people from getting too far out on their own, of calling them back to their place in the community. In our society, political satire often does similar work. A well-placed wisecrack can deflate pretensions, forcing the high and mighty to listen to the salt of the earth. Incivility is in the end only a way of building oneself up, of facing a perceived threat by finding strength in defiance. Humor works the opposite way, which is why stuffed shirts and autocrats can't stand it: it cuts opponents back down to size.

Or it puffs them up, as the case may be. One of the most popular bits of agitprop in recent anti-Trump demonstrations in London was a giant balloon caricature of the American president as a diapered toddler—like the Macy's Snoopy balloon, except snarling and clutching a cell phone in his tiny hands. It was magnificent. Yes, it was obnoxious, disrespectful verging on rude, and perhaps outside the bounds of good taste. But was it uncivil, exactly? There was nothing hateful about it, nothing prejudiced—and it accurately reflects his behavior. Photo after photo contrasted the enormous balloon with the crowds it loomed over, making the protesters' point with a striking visual. The American president, whoever he is, is always a larger-than-life figure, dominating the lives even of Britons. Yet this president is a far smaller man than his office and given to immature outbursts on Twitter. The balloon captured all of that—and it was very, very funny.

Presidents of the United States do not customarily respond to protests against them, let alone helium-filled caricatures of themselves, and yet I find myself almost wishing he would. Admittedly, the diss of a giant toddler Trump would be pretty hard to top in a game of the dozens, but it would serve to make the point: humor cuts both ways. Wisecrackers have to stay humble, too, because today's blessed lamb with a funny bone is just one joke away from being tomorrow's goat. (Ask the pastor how he knows.) If nothing else, humor has a way of bringing people together in competition. This works best when all parties consent to potentially being on the losing team.

Humor and humility can help us see the civility issue differently. They answer the question, “How civil are we supposed to be?” with “Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.” Sure, it’s a non sequitur, but that’s kind of the point.

When things are grim and I feel outraged and helpless, then I take refuge in humor. I’ll give up the profanity for Mom’s sake, and I’ll leave behind anger and hostility if Jesus insists. But you can have the dumb, disrespectful jokes about the high and mighty when you can pry the giant Trump toddler balloon from my cold, dead hands. It is my sincere and scriptural faith that Christ himself would have it no other way. My Lord and Savior would have been fascinated by that blimp.

And if I should happen to be the one skewered on a given day? Well, that’s just the price of admission. Wouldn’t be the first time, won’t be the last.

For someone like me—a confirmed crank trying to change his act—letting go of the impulse to incivility is certainly better for the blood pressure and the employment situation. It can also be a way to swallow a lot of legitimate feelings, to avoid saying things that need to be said, to allow powerful wrongdoers to go unchallenged. Humor has a role here. Jesus knew when to reach out with a kind and gentle hand, and he knew when a firm dressing-down was called for. He also knew the value of a one-liner.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Jokes that bind.”