

**“THE DUST OFF OUR FEET,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul Untied Church of Christ, Taylor, September 5, 2021**

Congregation, do you know that I have 2,076 books in my office and another 3,000 at the parsonage next door? I guess you could say I have an addiction of some kind.

We could even give it a fancy name like *bibliophilia*, which translates “love of books.”

In visiting here my mother-in-law used to express amazement that the parsonage didn’t sink under the weight of all the books shelved. It may be a hereditary disease. My great-grandmother was a voracious reader of religious books. When she died as a 32 year-old woman after taking a terrible fall on church steps, her 12 year-old daughter, my grandmother, loaded her coffin with a half-dozen or more books about the lives of the saints that she loved. Not certain about what might be available and awaiting for her cherished mother in heaven, my grandmother wanted to make sure that she had plenty of reading material.

Several years back I heard about a woman down in Texas being buried in her sporty Corvette. Or was it a pink T-bird? I don’t want to sound morbid. But maybe when my time comes my wife is going to have to have a big pit dug and hire a bulldozer to cram in all the books with me. I know they say you can’t take it with you. But is it *always* wrong to try?

On second thought, on a more faithful thought, it probably *is* better to follow the advice of Martin Luther in his great “Mighty Fortress” hymn where he calls upon us to let “goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.” Yes, rather than worry my wife about arrangements for a pit and a bulldozer, I’ll ask her to keep it simple. Just put the Good Book in my hands. That’s better than the beer can that some folks have stuffed in their caskets today. And that one book--that one wonderful, blessed book--has more wisdom to impart than all the other books combined and collected to my name.

Still, for here and now, I persist in my *bibliophilia*. And heretofore no one has offered to send me off to a treatment center as they do on television’s *Intervention* series for those battling fierce addictions. I find it hard to relinquish a book—as hard as it is to give up a friend. My perennial anxiety or fear is that I might want to return to the very book that I given away. In fact, I do re-read and re-use old books from my shelves, even as I move on to new ones.

This past week provides an example. There I was looking for space to stash some new books. And I started to think about getting rid of some older ones that I haven’t used or even perused for a long time. Among those long non-perused was a book entitled *Working with Difficult People* by an Australian human relations “expert” named Roberta Cava. But then, wouldn’t you know it, before discarding it for sure, I started to really examine it again. In quickly reading its flyleaf and turning its pages I understood why this

particular tome had found a space on my shelves in the first place. A hand-written inscription recorded that it was a gift, making it always harder, if not impossible, for me to give away. But the book's promotional description also stood out. The book touts itself as an effective manual of how to get "cooperation and respect from tyrants, connivers, badmouthers, and other difficult people you must work with every day."

Congregation, I laughed out loud as I read those words from the book in hand. And in that moment I also remembered laughing aloud a long, long time back when the book was first gifted to me.

Of course, as good for a laugh as it was, I didn't find Roberta Cava's book particularly helpful to me as a pastor back then. And as a workplace book I don't suppose it can be all that helpful now. First of all, we don't have that kind of church—if you know what I mean—where Roberta Cava's headlined issue is our pressing concern. Yet, secondly, as much as I do appreciate Roberta Cava's laser focus on this topic for certain workplaces, which yet keeps her book on my shelf for possible reference to others, we in this church already do have the Bible to guide us *for our lives in the world*. Yes, that same Bible with which I want to be buried.

In its own way, the Bible, particularly the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is a superb human relations manual. After all, difficult people have been around since time immemorial. And Jesus had a lot of experience with them. His all-too-human experience is very much pertinent to our times when some difficult folks out there seem to be getting more difficult than ever, given incidents we directly or indirectly witness of road rage or store rage, or even the brawls on airplanes.

If you think about it, none other than very difficult people landed Jesus on Calvary's cross. (*Mark 15:13; Luke 23:21; John 19:6*) Without being irreverent, we might even view Jesus' resurrection as God's way of proclaiming that difficult people will not have the final say or triumph. All this begs the worthy double question: How did Jesus deal with difficult people and how would God's own son have us do so? On this score very revealing, instructive, and helpful are our morning scripture lessons.

In our passage from Matthew Jesus busies himself commissioning his disciples for ministry, sending them out in pairs or teams. (*Matthew 10:5-16*) He does not, however, send them forth naïve, unwarned, and unprepared. Instead, Jesus imparts to them parallel advice that we would each do well to heed.

On the one hand, Jesus asks his disciples to be "as gentle as doves." (*Matthew 10:16*) Don't be greedy or ostentatious—i.e., big show-offs. (*Matthew 10:9-10*) Instead, keep your own wants to a minimum and don't ask for more than you really need. Get out there and help other people who are impoverished and suffering. Generously give a hand to those who are lost and messed up. Don't even shy away from people with

dreaded skin diseases, whom everyone else thinks live condemned by God. Do what you can to make a difference for their lives. Specifically, while preaching the good news of God's coming reign of love and justice, "heal the sick, bring back the dead to life, and drive out demons" that make people crazy. (*Matthew 10:6-7*)

On the other hand, Jesus, who was always reality-based, does make clear to his disciples that in all their helpfulness they are going to meet up with the some tough, mean, truculent people. Indeed, at moments ahead they are going to be like "sheep [sent] to a pack of wolves." (*Matthew 10:16*) Consequently, every one of his disciples needs to be "as cautious as snakes," which is a wise thing. (*Matthew 10:16*) Yet if we read our passage from Matthew carefully, we realize that Jesus doesn't stop there. Indeed, as he talks about entering a new town and a given household, he offers three additional pieces of very worthy advice.

Piece of advice #1: When you encounter something spiritually wrong or misguided in any place you visit, be honest with yourself about what you see or feel. Don't bless or approve what is evil and wrong—or pretend to do so. Otherwise, we contribute to it further. Most important of all, remain faithful and righteous. Know your values as a Christian disciple and stand up in witness to them. Get out of that situation if you can't. (*Matthew 10:13*)

Piece of advice #2 from Jesus: Don't try to get back at difficult people, which can bring out spiritual ugliness in you. Instead, leave difficult people to God. God will be their judge. They will have to live with the consequences of their own mid-deeds. As Jesus puts it so graphically: "On Judgment Day, God will show more mercy to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah" who were consumed by fireball "than to the people" who, giving themselves over to selfishness and sin, treat you badly." (*Genesis 19:24; Matthew 10:15*) Trust God to change what we cannot.

Piece of advice #3: When you come out of a bad situation with difficult people, shake the dust off your feet. (*Matthew 10:14*) Don't take it with you. Don't track the mud or dirt of what you've just negatively experienced down the road. The folks you next meet deserve better. You do too. If we let them, difficult people can soil, sour, and spoil our whole outlook and undermine the positive attitude and hopeful outlook that God wants us to bring to every fresh situation.

Although it comes divinely from high, I think this is all sage, pragmatic advice. No other strategies for dealing with difficult people can top these. Basically, then, our challenge and responsibility as Christian disciples in dealing with the mean, the rude, and the crude is to face them down squarely and honestly without losing our cool or our faith in a crunch. Sometimes we just need to exit from the situation and leave them to God.

I know that advice is always easier to give than to take, let alone apply. Yet let's not fool ourselves claiming that our situation is worse than anything Jesus already contemplated in giving us advice and counsel. He saw and experienced the worst and kept his faith, setting the example for us to do likewise. In this life, God never promises us a rose garden. It's not been a garden ever since the fall from the Garden of Eden. Human sin and selfishness are real. Following Jesus' teachings and example we need to maintain our own faith and emotional and spiritual equilibrium in the face of those who by their bad behavior might tempt us to sin in reaction. If folks like ourselves don't strive to uphold true Christian discipleship our lives together are going to witness another kind of catastrophic "climate change" which makes our nation unfit for civilized existence.

Of course, alongside Jesus' advice, this morning's words from the Apostle Paul provide us guidance that can keep our hearts and minds "safe in union" with God's son. (*Philippians 4:7*) And it really does all fit together.

Besides merely steeling ourselves against the sinful temptations of reactive behavior, the Apostle calls us to be cultivate those deeper personal virtues of faith that can help keep us calm, sane, and balanced even when other folks around us are acting meanly, stupidly, or crazy. Be joyful in the Lord, Paul advises. (*Philippians 4:4*) Show a gentle attitude to everyone—even if you have to walk away from them. (*Philippians 4:5*) No violence, please. Meanwhile, don't worry. Keep a thankful heart. A spirit of gratitude helps calm the troubled soul. Finally, be proactive in your faith life. "Fill your minds with those things that are good and deserve praise: things that are true, noble, pure, lovely, and honorable." (*Philippians 4:8*) Keep contemplating these things, rather than all the trashy and miserable stuff that can just further upset us. Very last but not at all least, let what you know to be good in God's sight inspire and strengthen you to live accordingly, putting into practice what you learned, thereby becoming an example and inspirations for others. (*Philippians 4:9*) In our ever-troubled world, this is the way, Paul says, to peace.

Difficult people are not going away. Yet thanks to Jesus Christ and an apostle like Paul who follows in his name, we are blessed with a way to deal graciously with whatever confronts us. How we handle it all shapes the future of this world in which we live. Let's always respond to what comes as Christians—Jesus' true disciples. Keeping calm and gentle and shaking the dust off our feet as we depart from any mean situations that we can't directly change or modify, may we remain a people of faith, hope, and goodwill.

**Amen.**