

## See each other as brother, sister

This is most certainly true: Remember Eighth Commandment explanation



MICHAEL D. WATSON

I remember a particularly contentious meeting with a church council when I was a synod bishop. It didn't start out that way, but bit by bit the mood changed. Council members began to question my motives, then my veracity, then my character. Finally I said, "Hey, I have a mother you know." That broke the tension. My point was that I was a human being just like them, not a bloodless function-

ary. I had become "The Man," which made me sad and was hugely confusing for my husband.

I would like to say this was an isolated incident in my experience of life in the church, but it was not. Nor is it confined to the church. Suspicion and blame aren't new. Bearing false witness was around way before Moses received the commandments. But it seems that the climate of distrust and accusation in society has become more heated. It's just more disappointing when it happens in the church.

Many theories can be put forward about why we behave this way: people feel threatened or discounted, people feel deeply about an issue, the topic at hand is critically important, truth is at stake. When the discussion or letter or email reaches this level of intensity, it's no longer possible to hear one another. And as the tension and the volume increase, our vision becomes impaired. We are no longer able to see the other as a brother or sister, someone for whom Christ died.

This constricted conversation is becoming a habit. It is the default setting for us when our position is challenged or when we challenge someone else. It is a bad habit. And like all bad habits it is, in the short run, a lot easier and more fun to practice than its corresponding good habit. I'll admit it, there is something satisfying about being so certain. It's easier to ascribe motive than to engage in an open dialogue with the sincere intent of seeking understanding. Righteous indigna-

tion feels good.

In the church this is called "prophetic," as if being prophetic only takes the form of scolding. I have received letters and emails suggesting I do things that are anatomically impossible and certainly not appropriate to reprint in a church publication. These epistles sometimes end with "In Christian love ...." I know a conversation is going to head south in a hurry when it starts with these words: "With all due respect ...."

There is another way.

In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther gives us this explanation of the Eighth Commandment: "We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

What a beautiful and generous way of being. The self is no longer at the center. The focus is no longer on justifying or defending one's own position. All attention and care can be given to the other. As the volume is turned down our sight improves—we now see a precious child of God. Paradoxically this gentle approach makes it more possible to have difficult conversations.

**The church can model respectful dialogue. Instead of contributing to the static of suspicion that fills the airwaves we can be a community that creates an open space where questions really are questions, not accusations, and disagreement doesn't devolve into discounting.**

We believe baptism makes a difference and makes us different, that our lives are now hidden in Christ, that we are inseparably joined to the love of God in Christ Jesus. We believe that in baptism God has set us free from sin, death and the devil. God has also set us free from ourselves. Because of this it is possible to engage in a new way of being together.

The church can model respectful dialogue. Instead of contributing to the static of suspicion that fills the airwaves, we can be a community that creates an open space where questions really are questions, not accusations, and disagreement doesn't devolve into discounting. If we were to do this, congregational meetings might actually be fun.

Let's try this: the next time we find ourselves on the giving or receiving end of less-than-graceful communication let's recite Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment. □

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: [bishop@elca.org](mailto:bishop@elca.org).

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