You have probably noticed that gas prices have sky-rocketed over the last few months. And you may have been in a situation similar to one I experienced more than once this summer. I don’t know about you, but I tend to head for the places that have the lowest prices—of course, many other folks know these same places. Last weekend, I found gas at 1.67 a gallon—and so did everyone else.

Here’s the vexing situation. I pull into a line of cars waiting to fill up their tanks. There are two cars first in line, each along side a gas pump, each pumping gas. Then, the first one finishes and pulls away; the second one is still pumping, so the line can’t move forward. Which one of the four of us in the line behind gets to scoot into the empty slot? Well, in a flash, a car came flying in from the street, zipped passed all four of us waiting in line, and slid into that empty spot. What would Emily Post say? Doesn’t the one who has been waiting the longest get served first?

Well, there are no Emily Post guidelines for self-service gas stations. But there are some basic ideas about how we live well together in community, and how we are or strive to become a civil society. The kinds of things you learned in kindergarten—how to take turns, how to share, how to say “thank you,” how to treat each other. In a word, civility.

We Christians have guidelines more compelling and complete than those offered by Emily Post or Miss Manners. Galatians 5:22-25 states it best: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such there is not law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

The title of my talk this morning is “Blatant Civility.” I’ve already introduced the notion of civility. But why did I pair it with such an unlikely modifier? For “blatant” means “brazenly obvious.” As Christians, our call to civility is indisputable and likewise, our actions—our civility—must be indisputably, undeniably, brazenly obvious.
I’d like to share with you some thoughts about two situations where we need to demonstrate blatant civility, two situations that have everything to do with who we are, and where we are, as we begin this academic year.

**Our Campus Community**

Our mission statement starts with the phrase “Trinity Christian College is a community….” We are a community together: students and secretaries, faculty and financial aid counselors, resident directors and registrar. And each year we reconfigure our community as new faculty, staff, and students enter this campus to fill the places left by those who graduated or retired.

Where should we see blatant civility in this, our own community?

Let me suggest that if kindergarten represents one bookend where we start to learn about civility, then college is the other bookend. Like kindergarten, there are basic rules to understand: it’s inappropriate to walk into class 10 minutes late; professors like questions, but students, don’t ask so many that you derail the class session. Students, the matter of how to address professors can be a bit confusing: Dr. Smith; Professor Smith; Ms. Smith? Stick with Professor Smith; you can’t go wrong. Faculty members, blessings to you as you try to learn the names of 100 students this week; addressing students by name is much better than “you with the blue hair.”

But unlike kindergarten, college is a place where your voice, students, is important. Yes, students challenging administrators about college priorities is important. And yes, knowing how to tell the person down the hall to quiet down at 3 a.m. is also important. And yes, knowing when to ask the key question in class is important.

But most important is how you use your voice and actions on campus, whether in the classroom or in the snack shop. My hope is that your actions are characterized by blatant civility.

Why emphasize undeniable, indisputable civility? Two reasons. First, because it is appropriate for an academic institution, perhaps a chief legacy of the age of reason. A liberal arts education should help you become a critical thinker, a person not easily confused by light-weight ideas and passing fads, nor a person stuck with baseless assumptions and a mind closed to testing new ideas. It should help you think analytically, to draw
upon the knowledge of others as well as personal experience before forming conclusions.

A liberal arts education should lead you to develop both as one who listens and one who speaks. One who listens is not passive and gullible; rather he or she listens well and is critical as well as reflective. One who speaks in the academy knows when to ask questions as well as what questions to ask. A liberal arts education should convince all of us how little we know and how much we need to learn. A liberal arts education should transport us to a level of indisputable civility, whether we’re debating issues in class or in the cafeteria.

Second, this is a Christian college. The posture of the academy—civility that suspends conclusions, searches for all possible answers, and broadens one’s thinking—is alone insufficient. Because we are a Christian institution of higher learning, we do listen carefully and withhold judgment, but here’s the key difference—we are always testing ideas against God’s truth. Notice: as Christians—as holders of the Truth—we still listen carefully, search thoroughly, and consider the possibilities.

Our commitment to the truth doesn’t make it unnecessary for us to pursue knowledge. Rather, we take up the pursuit with God’s Truth clearly before us. And what should characterize us in this pursuit? Not being overly confident, smug, know-it-all Christians. Nor being mealy-mouthed, weak-kneed patsies. Rather, our civility in the academic arena should be consistent with the passage from Galations: it should be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In other words, with blatant civility.

The Broader Community

Earlier I quoted from the initial phrase of our mission statement: “Trinity Christian College is a community….” Let me now read that entire statement: *Trinity Christian College is a community of Christian scholarship committed to shaping lives and transforming culture.*

How do we, current students and alumni, faculty and staff of Trinity, engage in God’s work in God’s world? In short, how do we transform culture? First, before answering the question, let’s be clear about the jargon. While it may
be familiar to some of you, for others, the idea of transforming culture is still a little fuzzy.

Let’s look first at culture. By using the word culture, do we mean just the elements of society that embody artistic expression? Not at all. By culture, do we mean the specific beliefs and behaviors typical of a particular social, economic, or ethnic group? No; actually, we mean humankind and humankind’s varied practices, structures, and traditions.

Then, when we place the word transforming in front of culture, we’re actually talking about being part of God’s promise to restore this earth and its people—and the whole cosmos—into that wonderful place He originally intended for us. You know, when we read in Genesis about what God intended, it’s a garden filled with every good thing. And it was good. But if we turn from the first book of the Bible to Revelation, the last book of the Bible, then we read that God’s new creation is described not as a garden but as a city—the new Jerusalem. [Its walls] made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass; the great street of the city was of pure gold. [This] city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

How do we go about transforming culture? Maybe you come from another town or city. Perhaps you could tell me about your mayor who understands she’s part of a higher calling, working to restore your city in ways so that the glory of God gives it light. Perhaps you could point to how Christians have banded together in your hometown to address the problem of homeless individuals, or how believers have restored dilapidated homes to make them fit once again for families, or how followers of Christ with great integrity and ethical concern have restored financial stability to your city’s commercial center. Yes, when Christians put their minds to it and the Holy Spirit blesses their work, the picture of a city of pure gold gleams a bit brighter.

So what should we be doing here in the southwest suburbs of Chicago? Allow me to make two suggestions consistent with my theme of “blatant civility.”

First, as we seek to transform culture, we must be Christians with civility blatantly expressed…and we must be Christians who will not tolerate wrong. If you’re on an internship or aiding in a local school, and you see an
injustice, don’t ignore it. Ask what the Lord requires of you: To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

Walking humbly with God might provide the Old Testament roots for the New Testament’s Galatians passage I’ve already mentioned. But notice, too, Micah’s emphasis on justice and mercy. What about mercy for those who suffer four miles to the east of Palos in Robbins? Three people have been killed on a street in the same public housing complex in Robbins this summer. What can be done? What should Christians do? Pretend it’s someone else’s problem? No. We must be intolerant of murder and all of the personal and structural problems that give rise to it. We should long for those streets of gold in Robbins, in Palos Heights, in Chicago, and all over the world.

But longing for those streets of gold is not enough. We Christians must work diligently and with precision, blatantly using the skills we gained in kindergarten and now at college, demonstrating always the fruits of the Spirit and never giving up. God needs us to be the street pavers, paving with a golden touch, not steamrollers who abandon civility and obliterate everything in our paths.

Second, ask your college, Trinity Christian College, to do the same. Do we participate in local government only when we want to get a zoning requirement changed? Or are we involved in a wide range of civic matters? And as we’re involved in civic matters, do we participate with civility that cannot be overlooked? Are we considerate of neighbors? I hope so—and that’s why we have a new gate at 123rd street that will be closed to traffic during sleeping hours, with the hope that fewer cars traveling to and from campus will make for a quieter night.

And how will we give space for this fall’s presidential election? Will we make voter registration accessible? How will you find out about the absentee ballot process? Will we respect each others’ viewpoints, even when they differ from our own? If John Kerry and George Bush both came here, would they each be treated with hospitality and respect?

You see, if you’re going to be a Trinity student, and later a Trinity graduate who is part of God’s street-paving team—that godly group that seeks transformation even at street level—we can’t wait for later. We as a College must both model transformation and provide opportunity for you to do it.
But here’s the most important point, and don’t miss it: you will be effective—we will be effective—not as steamrollers, but as blatantly civil individuals, reflecting the fruits of the Spirit. Others will respect us, invite us to participate, and consider our ideas important if we demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit.

Then, and only then, will we have an opportunity to be a community that transforms culture. And in the process, your life will be shaped by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And what a difference you’ll make.

Blessings in this new academic year.