

**32963 article**

**8-4-09**

**Revs. Robert and Casey Baggott  
Community Church of Vero Beach**

### ***An Illness Abroad in the Land***

Recently we have been re-reading a book by Dr. M. Scott Peck entitled, *A World Waiting to Be Born*. In it, the opening sentence Peck offers his readers is this: "There is an illness abroad in the land." He then goes on to explain that the widespread illness could be diagnosed as incivility. Incivility, in this author's view, is not just occasional poor manners and impolite behavior, though those may be symptoms of it. Incivility, at its core, is rooted in self-centeredness that discounts the worth of others and even stoops to manipulation of them in service to self. Incivility is disease-like in its possibilities for contagion: when we've been used unkindly or unfairly, we are that much more likely to believe that indulging in such behavior ourselves is justified. If we've been insulted verbally, why not insult in response? If someone who disagrees with us belittles and demeans us, or even demonizes our motives or beliefs, then why not retaliate by showing how ignorant, foolish, or evil they are?

Today researchers tell us that we Americans are far from happy. Where we once stood at the top of all nations as having the happiest citizens, this is no longer the case. Perhaps our growing incivility has something to do with our unhappiness.

We were curious enough, in reading this book's examples of incivility, to gaze back to the first page and find it had been published in 1993 – fully sixteen years ago. The incivility M. Scott Peck criticized all those years ago seems all the more prevalent today. Particularly distressing was discovering that Peck, a psychiatrist, had outlined several cornerstones of civility which he felt certain could stem the growing tide of incivility if people were but willing to undertake the effort to reconsider their values, commitments, and assumptions. He asserted that individual lives could change for the better, and with individual personal change could come beneficial change for all of society. Change must start somewhere, and it could start with us.

It is a grand notion, isn't it, to believe we can play some role in changing the world like that? What initiative! What optimism! And while hopes for a changed and more civil society don't appear, at least from our vantage point, to have been realized as yet, the dreams of such a possibility aren't in any way foreign to those of us who profess an active faith. We, too, believe that lives can be changed for the better, and that changed lives are infectious – they go on to change yet more lives for the better. We envision the entire world standing ready to be enlightened and enriched by a sweep of great goodness that happens one life at a time.

So what is the key to turning the trend away from incivility and back toward civility, compassion, and understanding? It must be us ... you and me. No mandate from on high can assure it. Only our personal willingness to insist on civility as a foundation in our own lives has any hope of influencing others to agree with us. So let's do it. Let's make sure that instead of the illness of incivility, there is only a healthy goodness abroad in our land.