

Comma

1 Peter 3:13-22

May 25, 2014

Do you know any of these people?

She can't keep a job. She doesn't have a job now. She always starts out with good intentions, but then distractions or boredom or weak willpower or just plain laziness get in the way. She can't seem to follow through, can't seem to be able to see the big picture, won't buckle down, won't grow up. She's a total screw-up ... period.

He was my friend. I have tried to keep him as a friend. I have given him second chances, third chances, fourth chances. But too many times, way too many times, he has betrayed me, going behind my back, telling my secrets, trashing me to other friends. I was there for him when he needed me, but when I needed him? There won't be any more chances. He just can't be trusted ... period.

I have given her every opportunity. I let her back into my life, offered her my support, helped her get back on her feet again. But for what? What difference has it made? Nothing has changed. She doesn't change. She doesn't try to change. It's a two-way street. Maybe she doesn't have to meet me halfway, but she has to do something, take even the smallest step in my direction. And "thank you" would be nice. I've had enough. I'm done with her ... period.

We tried to help him. We tried to give him a fresh start, open up new possibilities for him, bolster his belief in himself, smooth the path in front of him. But old ways, old acquaintances, old entanglements, old habits, crack, money, reputation, they all get in the way, they won't let him change. Once you cross the line, you can't go back. Once a felon, always a felon ... period.

I can't do it. I want to change, I've tried to change, but I can't do it. Eventually, later or sooner, something or somebody pushes my buttons and I lose it. I lash out. I say things I don't want to say and don't really mean. I hurt people. I hurt my relationships. I hurt myself. I don't like it, but that's who I am ... period.

I can't do it. I'm too scared, too afraid of what people will think, too afraid of making a fool of myself. So I won't do it. I won't even try. It's better to be safe than to take that kind of risk. I wish I could speak up. I wish I would take chances. I don't like being a wuss, but I am who I am, and nothing is going to change me ... period.

Never place a period where God has placed a comma.

Never place a period where God has placed a comma! This is the third and final core value of the United Church of Christ.

The first? Continuing testament. God is still speaking!

And the second? Extravagant welcome. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

And the third and final core value of the United Church of Christ is this: changing lives. Never place a period where God has placed a comma.

God is still speaking, so we listen. We listen to God speaking to us still, calling us to be like him, full of love and mercy, calling us to be like Jesus, extending an extravagant and surprising welcome to everyone. We listen and we obey and so we say: no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

But remember, extravagant welcome means everyone is welcome. It doesn't mean anything goes. So if we open our arms to you and welcome you here and you do not change ... you are still welcome here, no matter!

But if we open our arms again and again, if we welcome you back again and again, and you do not change ... you are still welcome here, no matter!

But if we welcome you, if God welcomes you, and still you do not change ... you are still welcome here. The welcome will never be retracted. The welcome will never be retracted, but what's the welcome for? What is the purpose of God's mercy?

"Surely you know," Paul wrote in a letter to the Roman church, "surely you know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to a change of heart." God's kindness is meant to lead you to a change of heart. The purpose of God's mercy is changing lives -- transformation, reconciliation, healing, wholeness, goodness, blessing.

What keeps lives from changing? Many things, but mostly this ... fear. Fear and pride, which is nothing more or less than fear in disguise.

"Do not be afraid!" That's what Peter wrote in his letter. "Do not be afraid of anyone." Don't let them intimidate you. Don't let fear control you. Don't let fear make you like them. Don't be afraid. Be transformed!

Can you imagine the extraordinary power of a transformed people? Gentle, respectful, above reproach, not returning insult for insult, but choosing to suffer for doing good, if suffer they must, instead of returning evil for evil?

If fear keeps lives from changing, then what drives out fear? What enables lives to change? Love. Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid of anyone. Instead, let God's love for you transform you. Let God's love teach you how to love. Instead of being afraid of your persecutors, love them, and instead of them changing you, you may well change them.

Show mercy and love, just as God has shown you mercy and love. Never place a period where God has placed a comma.

God places lots of commas ...

The great flood could well have been a period, a rueful end to God's grand experiment, but God brought Noah and his family safely through the waters and made the flood not a period, but a comma.

The slavery of the descendants of Abraham in Egypt could have been a period, but God made it a comma, bringing them out of Egypt, settling them in a new land, and making them his own people.

The exile in Babylon could have been a period, an end -- no more homeland, no more distinctive identity, no more God, no more God's people -- but God made it a comma. The story wasn't finished.

The execution of Jesus seemed like a period, and those who made it happen, all those who wanted to be done with Jesus, certainly wanted it to be a period, but God made the cross a comma.

And when the day comes, when the day comes that heaven and earth pass away, when this age and this world and history as we know it comes to an end, it will not be a period, but a comma.

Never place a period where God has placed a comma! That's why I so strongly oppose the death penalty, because it puts a period on a person's life, cutting short any opportunity for changing lives, for redemption, for reconciliation. But we apply a "virtual" death penalty to other people all the time -- don't we? -- giving up on them, writing them off, making an end of the relationship, placing a period on their lives as far as we're concerned.

She's a total screw-up ... period.

He can't be trusted ... period.

I'm done with her ... period.

Once a felon, always a felon ... period.

And all too often we apply a "virtual" death penalty to ourselves, too, giving up on even trying to change, not believing transformation is possible, not believing we could ever be made new.

That's who I am ... period.

I am who I am, and nothing is going to change me ... period.

Never place a period where God has placed a comma, Your story is not finished! What do you think God is going to do with you next?