

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Putting Up With One Another**

*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. – Eph. 4:1-6, 25-32*

This past week I spent a couple of hours in a dentist chair, while a hygienist slowly blasted and scraped away the accumulated plaque coating my teeth. In the breaks when his hands and tools were not making me unintelligible, I asked him about himself. I don't think I have ever had a male hygienist before, so he told me about gender ratios in the occupation. He was Asian, so he told me about moving from Hong Kong with his family as a toddler, and how most of his extended family still lived in that storied city. And when I asked him about how the ongoing protests in Hong Kong were affecting those he knew, he talked about how he was reluctant to go home, because as a young man, the police might mistake him for a protestor. But more important, he found family gatherings uncomfortable because they had to be so careful what they talked about. If discussion turned to the protests, the discussion became too hot to handle. Apparently, that problem of an inability to engage in civil conversation across the political divide, is a common one, these days, not only in Hong Kong, but in many other places, most notably in the United States.

Nine years ago, In Tuscon, Arizona a disturbed young man opened fire on a group of people gathered to meet and talk with Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords at an event called "Congress on the Corner." He shot the congresswoman in the head at point blank range and then kept firing at others, wounding thirteen and killing six, including a nine year old girl. Apparently motivated by anti-government, anti-religious and sexist beliefs, the gunman had fixated on Giffords as a female, Jewish congresswoman. After the shooting, he spent a considerable amount of time in treatment for paranoid schizophrenia and eventually pled guilty to nineteen counts of murder and attempted murder, and was sentenced to 140 years in prison. Miraculously, the congresswoman Gabby Giffords survived, although she suffered permanent brain damage, and is no longer able to serve in Congress.

The shooting sparked a widespread debate about the decline in civility in American politics. Shortly after that shooting, I watched an Arizona Sherriff named Clarence

Dupnik as he said that the shooting may have been influenced by “the vitriol... anger, the hatred, the bigotry” spewing from radio and TV commentators. It led Jim Wallis, the editor of Sojourners Magazine, and a leader in the Progressive Evangelical movement (yes, there is one, although the Conservative Evangelicals get way more press) to write a “Peace and Civility Pledge” (appended to the end of this message) that I invite you to read carefully and commit yourself to living out.

That was nine years ago, but things have gotten worse since then, especially in the United States. Today, the impeachment trial is demonstrating a profound divide in which democratic rules and legal processes are being submerged by a vicious struggle for power. It is discouraging, and suggests that real democracy and the accountability of elected officials to the law is on life support in that country.

Nearly twenty years ago, at the funeral for Pierre Trudeau, his son Justin told a story in his eulogy that has stuck with me. He told about a time when he was a boy and his father took him into the parliament building. They went into the parliamentary cafeteria where one of his father’s political opponents was eating with his daughter. Justin didn’t name the opponent, but he gave enough information that it was clear that the man was Joe Clark, who would have been leader of the Official Opposition at the time. Justin made a disparaging remark about the man. Prime Minister Trudeau gave his son a disappointed look and led him over to introduce him to his opponent and the two families had a friendly chat. It was a lesson, Justin said, that he never forgot, that in spite of serious differences, very different visions of what Canada should and could be, the two men respected each other as men, respected each others’ commitment to their country, respected each others’ dedication to public service.

Things have deteriorated since then. I have been trying to imagine such a conversation happening between some of our current leaders. We didn’t have to imagine it during the last federal election, when Trudeau disparaged Andrew Sheer as a closet ideologue, and Sheer accused Trudeau of being a liar and untrustworthy. Perhaps that is all political theatre, and watching the rough and tumble of political debate from afar has given me the same distorted view that Justin Trudeau had as a youngster.

But my sense is that something has changed, and it isn’t a good thing. It isn’t a good thing when respectful dialogue is replaced by inflammatory language. It isn’t a good thing when public servants show such little respect for each other because it leads others to have little respect for them and for the important work they do to guide our common life. It isn’t a good thing for our democracy when we can’t

engage differences respectfully, because no one ideology or perspective has a corner on the truth. When people with different ideas and viewpoints cannot discuss and debate, civilly, then they cannot learn from each other. The different points of view that different parties bring to our common life should enrich our understanding, not debase it. There is a reason, after all, why the leading opposition party is called “Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition.” Honest, civil disagreement is an act of loyalty, because without it, our political institutions would have blinders, keeping them from seeing alternatives.

That is what happened in the United States after 9/11. In the fervor of patriotic sentiment that followed those horrific terrorist attacks, those who criticized President Bush’s militaristic response were condemned as traitors. Bill Maher’s television show was cancelled, because he argued against calling terrorists “cowards.” One of the Dixie Chicks – the country band - made some critical comments on stage, and people were so enraged that a whole tour was cancelled. More importantly, American journalists were cowed and failed to write independently. And partly as a result, the U.S. launched a disastrous war against Iraq, based on a falsehood.

Disagreement and debate strengthen our common life, and we should welcome such disagreements, both in politics, and in the church. That is why, this past week, we hosted an annual service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an international event sponsored by the Roman Catholic church and the World Council of Churches (which includes most Protestants and Orthodox churches). But from the very beginning, it has been a persistent temptation for Christians to brand those who differ as heretics and apostates. We have too often lost sight of the fundamental truth that we can benefit from diverse viewpoints. And that is why Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus so clearly urges the people of that church to speak the truth respectfully and gently with each other, avoiding foul language and evil talk, guarding our anger, and learning to express it appropriately. Notice that he doesn’t suggest that they keep silent. He encourages them to speak the truth, to be honest, because we need honesty, and it is in such short supply.

Over the next few months, this congregation will be undertaking a process of discernment about calling a new minister or possibly expanding to a ministry team. There may be a variety of points of view about what you are looking for in a new minister. But if differences don’t arise this year, they will arise later. Perhaps those differences will be over important theological and ethical questions, or questions about finances or building management, or personalities. The possibilities of

differences are virtually endless. Congregations are human communities, and there are all kinds of things that can come up.

But when we face differences, often the process for addressing them is more important than the outcome. In a congregation, the decision-making process should not be a political contest in which we try to win over each other to our point of view. It isn't my point of view that matters, or yours. Discernment focuses on what God wants, not on what we want, and as we seek to discern what God wants, many points of view will be important. We will agree about some things and disagree about others. And it is to the extent that we are willing to listen to each other respectfully, considering that we may have something to learn from each other – it is to that extent that we will be able to listen for the leading of God. Perhaps at the end of the process, we will still disagree about what God wants for us. I think that is entirely possible, nor is it necessarily a bad thing. After all, “while there is one Lord, one faith and one baptism, one God and Father of us all,” as Paul says, each of us is unique. We do not have to all agree in order to be able to respect each other. We do not have to be the same before we can, as Paul also says, be humble and gentle, be patient, bear with one another in love, maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of love. Unity is not uniformity. In fact, in the middle section of this chapter, the part we skipped over, Paul talks precisely about the diversity of Christians, about how our diversity is a gift from God that we called to cherish because it enriches our common life. Paul never says we all have to agree in order to be worthy of the calling to which we are called. He says rather, that we are to bear with one another in love, which is a polite way of saying that we are “put up with each other,” even when it isn't easy, even when our differences make it challenging.

Following that horrific shooting nine years ago in Arizona, Michelle Obama, the American First Lady at the time, wrote about how parents can talk to their children about such horrible events. We can teach our children, she wrote,

the practice of assuming the best, rather than the worst, about those around us. We can teach them to give others the benefit of the doubt, particularly those with whom they disagree... We can explain to them that although we might not always agree with those who represent us, anyone who enters public life does so because they love their country and want to serve it.

I think that those are wise words, wise words for parents, and wise words for churches (although it is not always true, as has become clearer in the last few years, that not everyone who enters public life wants to serve their country – a few

seem more interested in boosting their own egos, I still think it makes sense to assume the best of each other, until that assumption is disproved). For in a society in which so many people seem to have lost the ability to disagree respectfully, in which people heap abuse on those with whom they disagree, the ability to engage differences respectfully is vitally important. If as churches, we can engage differences with civility and respect, we will have modeled something truly precious. We will have demonstrated to a fractious culture that difference and the ability to engage it constructively is not only possible, but a tremendous gift!

**Peace and Civility Pledge**, by Jim Wallis, editor, *Sojourners Magazine* (2011)

The church can offer a message of hope and reconciliation to a nation that is hurting and deeply divided. We urge those who claim the name of Christ to “put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” ([Ephesians 4:31-32](#)).

We pledge to God and to each other that we will lead by example in a society where [civil discourse](#) and [peacemaking](#) are rare. We will work to model a better way in how we treat each other in our many communities, across religious and political lines. We will strive to create safe and sacred spaces for common prayer and community discussion as we come together to seek God’s will for our church, our nation and our world.

1. We believe Jesus’ teaching that “Blessed are those who make peace” ([Matthew 5:9](#)). We acknowledge that most of us have been guilty of violence in our hearts and with our tongues. We hold ourselves to the higher standard to which Christ called us: to refrain from [not only physical violence](#) but violence of the heart and tongue. “If you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement.” ([Matthew 5:22-23](#)).

2. We commit that our dialogue with each other will reflect the spirit of the scriptures, which tell us, in relating to each other, to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” ([James 1:19](#)).

3. We believe that each of us, and our fellow human beings, are created in the image of God. This belief should be reflected in the honor and respect we show to each other, particularly in how we speak. “With the tongue we bless the Lord and [Creator], and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God … this ought not to be so” ([James 3:9-10](#)).

4. We pledge that when we disagree, [we will do so respectfully](#), without falsely impugning the other’s motives, attacking the other’s character, or questioning the other’s faith. We will be mindful of our language, being neither arrogant nor boastful in our beliefs as we strive to “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” ([Ephesians 4:2](#)).

5. We recognize that we cannot function together as citizens of the same community, whether local or national, unless we are mindful of how we treat each other. Each of us must therefore “put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” ([Ephesians 4:25](#)).

6. We commit to pray for our political leaders — those with whom we agree or disagree. “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made — for kings and all who are in high positions” ([1 Timothy 2:1-2](#)).

7. We believe that it is more difficult to hate others, even adversaries and enemies, when we are praying for them. We commit to pray for each other, those with whom we agree and those with whom we may disagree, so that we may be faithful witnesses to our Lord, who prayed “that they may be one” ([John 17:22](#)).

