

NORTHEASTERN OHIO SYNOD

August 11, 2016

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

[Ephesians 4:29 NRSV]

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ and people of God of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

You may have noticed that we are in the midst of a Presidential election year.

For the next however many days remain until November 8, Election Day 2016, television commercials will be constantly acclaiming the virtues of political candidates. Your mailboxes will be crammed full of flyers and leaflets asking for your vote for a myriad of issues. And not to be left out, you will receive an endless number of emails soliciting your support by way of a financial campaign contribution, volunteering your time making phone calls, or door-to-door appeals.

All this is well and good. We should be a part of the political process. As our ELCA Social Statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, states: "The Gospel does not take the Church out of the world but instead calls it to affirm and to enter more deeply into the world."

There is, however, another side to this political process that we should all find distasteful. Candidates and their surrogates seem to go out of their way to make points by demeaning their opponents. These attacks go beyond mere disagreement on fundamental issues, they become personal. Commercials, slogans, and campaign speeches are full of sweeping generalizations about individuals or entire groups of people; labeling, defaming and demeaning their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs.

The effect of this is that we tend to get caught up in the fervor of what passes for support of our candidate or our issue. Without giving it much thought, we take on that identical disposition, becoming an echo chamber for those same commercials and slogans we claim to detest.

The idea of defaming, insulting and maligning those whose opinions differ from ours goes against all that we are taught as people of faith.

The eighth commandment states that: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Martin Luther, in his *Small Catechism*, goes on to explain the commandment this way: "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.”

Several passages in Holy Scripture also inform us on this matter. One I most often rely on is the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, a verse of which is cited at the top of this letter.

It is exhausting to live in an environment of incessant degradation and disparagement. Yet that has become part and parcel of political campaigning in our country today. Many have grown immune or indifferent, threatening to withdraw altogether from the process.

Will political campaigns become any less contentious? Most likely not. Yet we cannot lose sight of the fact that despite the divisiveness of the discourse, God is active in the midst of it. How? Through us.

Our challenge as Christians and as the Church is to demonstrate to the world that there is a better way. Imagine how different our society would be if we worked at ways of really having serious discussion about issues that affect all of us without resorting to hostile rhetoric and name calling! It is difficult, but it is what I believe Christ calls us to pursue.

As the apostle Paul tells us in the final verses of Ephesians: *“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. 4:31-32]

The last seven words of that reading are key: *“as God in Christ has forgiven you.”*

We are a broken and fallen humanity, but by God’s mercy, Jesus gave his life on the cross for us and for our forgiveness. In the waters of baptism, we were reborn children of God. God’s love is greater than the ways of the world. As the body of Christ, we are joined to God’s mission, called to grow in faith, and make God’ love known on earth.

As we proceed toward November, I would hope none of us shies away from the political process. But I pray we approach it in such a way that witnesses to the love of God in you.

Blessings!



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende