

I just filled out my absentee ballot and am getting ready to return it to the Board of Elections. Call me a political geek, but I still get shivers up and down my spine when I'm filling out my election ballot. Whether from the privacy of the ballot booth, or the comforts of my kitchen table, there is a feeling of sacredness in casting my vote. After weeks of meticulous research on all the candidates, I proudly shade in the circles next to the names of those I believe will work most diligently toward the goal of forming "a more perfect union," and who will best exemplify the values I cherish based on following Jesus. Having been raised in the "mugwump" tradition of my native Vermont, my vote has always been and will continue to be for the individual, not the party. It's not that I am against political parties, but from their very start, political parties have always held the potential to be divisive breeding grounds for myopic tribalism.

To say the times in which we live are divisive is a major understatement. The seeds of anger and distrust have been sown so widely across our land, that political adversaries are now deemed enemies. The politics of compromise has long ago been supplanted by the politics of "winner-takes-all". The majority political party no longer views its minority counterpart as the "loyal opposition," but as a group that must be destroyed at all costs. The vitriol and hatred that permeate the airwaves at best has produced crippling anxiety and despair; and at worst has given a platform to those who seek violent ends. Who among us hasn't imagined the potential for unspeakable violence on or around election day? There are times I'm almost afraid to turn on the news.

Now, more than ever the world around us needs an alternative to the fear; the anger and the hatred. Who better to offer that alternative voice than you and me? Who better to speak peace into the chaos, than those who follow the Prince of Peace; the resurrected One who long ago breathed peace into fearful disciples hiding behind locked doors? Who better to offer love than those who follow the One who reminded his friends that loving God and loving neighbor are all that matter?

Almost a year ago, the ELCA joined with other mainline denominations in supporting the "Golden Rule 2020: A Call for Dignity and Respect in Politics." The call of this initiative is simple.

1. To pray for the healing of divisions in our country, and
2. To promote the use of the Golden Rule in our own political discussions and election activities.

Christian faith leaders around the country, including our own presiding bishop Elizabeth Eaton, signed on to the following statement of support,

We are Christians with different theological and political views who have come together to express concern about the polarization and incivility that is tearing our country apart. We are also deeply troubled by the prospect of an angry and hateful political campaign season in 2020 that will further divide us as a nation.

We believe that we can find guidance through this national dilemma in the teachings of Jesus. In particular, we believe that Jesus' command to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" should be taken seriously by Christians who engage in political activity. We also believe that if enough people follow this "Golden Rule" principle, it will help generate the respect and civility we so desperately need in our country.

Churches have an important role to play in helping to heal America, and we hope and pray that local congregations will be active in efforts to increase understanding and bridge divisions in our country between now and the 2020 election.

The question we are left with is this: In these times, how can we be a church for the sake of the world, a light to show God's love? For starters, we can proclaim the gift of the gospel, which reminds us that we are in the world and not of the world. We can affirm that calling the powerful to account for how they treat the poor, the orphan, and the stranger is a holy task. Jesus himself was known to turn over tables from time to time. We can publicly address the powerful or meet privately with a decision-maker to exchange views. We can attend a rally or a protest; We can learn how to converse civilly with our neighbors recognizing in them the image of God; We can take the time to learn the issues and pray about them before casting our votes. In short, as followers of Christ, we can participate in our democracy by reminding ourselves that the gospel proclaims God's love for all people, the powerful decision-makers as well as those living on the margins.

Whatever the outcome of the elections this year, the work of the gospel goes on. May your vote and mine, speak to that reality while bearing God's creative and redeeming Word to all the world.

Peace in Christ (and in the ballot booth)
Pastor Doug