

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

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“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40).

At the end of March, I spent a delightful week with the bishop and rostered leaders of the Montana Synod at their annual theological conference. The added bonus was that we were joined by the bishop and clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of Montana and by Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. There are many things that are unique to our particular traditions, but it became clear that we share a whole lot more. At one point during a presentation, Curry leaned over to me and said that if he closed his eyes he would swear that he was at one of his own meetings.

During the convocation two participants, one Lutheran and one Episcopalian, noted that other civic and religious leaders had issued statements about the need for civil discourse during this election season, and they wondered if the leaders of the ELCA and Episcopal Church could do the same. Both were clear that they didn’t want a political statement or an endorsement of any party or candidate. They just felt that some of the rhetoric was no longer appealing to our better selves, but was opening a door to division and suspicion. They wanted to know if their faith communities could speak a word to our people that could bring some clarity and hope.

It’s worth noting that the first part of the First Amendment has to do with religious freedom: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” By the time of the Bill of Rights, the United States was already home to those who had been at least hindered in their religious life because of established religions in former countries and in this country. Dissenters from England, Roman Catholics and Quakers faced opposition and suppression from the state. The First Amendment was intended to keep the government out of religion. It wasn’t intended to keep the religious community from speaking to or participating in government.

Lutherans don’t withdraw from the world. Martin Luther believed that people of faith have a duty to participate in the political sphere and, when necessary, to call civil authorities to account. He also offered this helpful explanation of the Eighth Commandment: “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” (Small Catechism).

Now to the issue of civil discourse during this political season. I understand that the world is a dangerous place; I understand that many in our country feel left behind and left out. There are legitimate security, foreign policy and domestic policy concerns. Candidates and political parties have the duty to speak to these concerns and make the case for their platform.

During the theological gathering, Curry held up Jesus’ answer to the lawyer that love of God and love of neighbor, and the standard by which we treat others, should be the way we engage society. Political speech that doesn’t ensure that the “other” is treated with the same respect and care that we would wish for our own brother or sister or father or mother is not what God intends for God’s beloved community. We are Easter people. We have been redeemed by the indescribably beautiful act of love on the cross. I ask that we, and those seeking office, would remember that we are entrusted with a redeemed world, and we must always remember that those who disagree with us are also those for whom Christ died.

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