

A NATION THAT PASSES BY

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 26 He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' 27 He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' 28 And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' 30 Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' 37 He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

(Luke 10:25-37, NRSV)

This Tuesday, November 7, is Election Day. While it is always gratifying to see democracy in action and hope that somehow this process will move our country forward, Election Day also does something else for us—it ends what by all accounts has been a campaign season full of more mudslinging, half-truths, and outright lies than many of us can ever remember.

When did all of this uncivil behavior take over our elections, both national and local? When did we move from the democratic process to the demonizing process in American politics? Many a milestone can be pointed to along the way but this week I learned of an event back in 1856 that is worse than anything we've seen in all the recent negative politics.

MSNBC highlighted this sad piece of history as follows: “On the 22nd of May, 1856, as the deteriorating American political system veered toward the edge of the cliff, U.S. Rep. Preston Brooks of South Carolina shuffled into the Senate of this nation, his leg stiff from an old dueling injury, supported by a cane. And he looked for the familiar figure of the prominent senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner. Brooks found Sumner at his desk, mailing out copies of a speech he had delivered three days earlier — a speech against slavery. The congressman matter-of-factly raised his walking stick in midair and smashed its metal point across the senator's head. Congressman Brooks hit his victim repeatedly. Sen. Sumner somehow got to his feet and tried to flee. Brooks chased him and delivered untold blows to Sumner's head. Even though Sumner lay unconscious and bleeding on the Senate floor, Brooks finally stopped beating him only because his cane finally broke. Others will cite John Brown's attack on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry as the exact point after which the Civil War became inevitable. In point of fact, it might have been the moment, not when Brooks broke his cane over the prostrate body of Sen.

Sumner — but when voters in Brooks’ district started sending him new canes.”¹

While today’s politicians aren’t literally whacking one another over the head with canes, their character attacks and negative ads aim to leave their opponents down for the count. To make matters worse, many times politicians use mudslinging to avoid talking about real life and death issues. All of the fighting keeps those in power from being held responsible and those seeking office from being forced to give detailed answers on their policy positions.

For me this brings to mind the Parable of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke. As you will recall from the passage, robbers attacked a man who was minding his own business walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The attackers beat him up, took everything he had, and left him half-dead. Luckily a priest saw the injured man. Did he rush over to help? No. Did he pull out his cell phone and called 911? No. But he did take action—he crossed over to the other side and passed by, never making eye contact. Then another religious man, a Levite, ambled down the road. The Levite saw the injured man. Did he remove his cloak to warm the victim? No. Did he kneel down and reassure the wounded man that everything would be okay? No. He didn’t miss a step as he successfully passed by the hurting fellow without getting involved. Finally a Samaritan journeyed down the road. He saw the injured man, presumably Jewish, and since Jews and Samaritans hated each other, did the Samaritan walk over and spit in the face of the victim? No. Did he pick up a rock to finish off the enemy of his people? No. The Samaritan, whom we call good, provided first aid, disinfected the wounds, lifted the victim on to his donkey, and took him to an inn. Then, instead of abandoning the man to fend for himself, the Samaritan gave the innkeeper money to take care of the

injured man and promised to pay more as it was necessary on his next trip.

Many times we've heard this parable applied to personal morality, the notion that we as individuals should take care of our world's injured and hurting and be careful not to discriminate against the so-called outsiders, the Samaritans of our society. However, today I want to apply this parable to our national ethics because in a democracy it is our job to hold our elected officials accountable. How do we as a nation and the politicians we elect measure up when compared to the Good Samaritan? Are we a nation that cares and works for the well-being of the world's most vulnerable citizens or are we as a nation more interested in power and affluence at the expense of the world's poor and needy? Does our nation stoop down to assist the wounded or do we pass by on the other side?

Without question America has gone the extra mile time and time again to help people in peril—our involvement in WW II and the Marshall Plan, our response to the terrible tsunami in the Indian Ocean region, our assistance to Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine and the Vietnamese Boat People fleeing a totalitarian government, through the Peace Corp and Americorp, Head Start, Medicaid, and Medicare, and especially through the ideals we espouse as the world's first and foremost modern democracy. As a nation we have made and will continue to make a positive impact on the world.

My question is this, what could and should we be doing better? What issues have the politicians and public failed to discuss because party ideologues were too busy beating each other over the head with partisan canes? What discussions should we have heard and what issues might motivate us to vote on Tuesday?

Throughout the Bible people of faith heard God's call to take care of the hungry and homeless, orphans and widows. What have we done to help the poorest of the poor? According to Bread for the World, an organization I've been involved with for almost 20 years, "More than 800 million people in the world go hungry. In developing countries, 6 million children die each year, mostly from hunger-related causes. In the United States, 13.9 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet. That means one in ten households in the U.S. are living with hunger or are at risk of hunger."² Are we going to be a nation that looks away and passes by on the other side or are we going to roll up our sleeves to help alleviate this tragedy? The good news from Bread for the World is that, "We have the means. The financial costs to end hunger are relatively slight. The United Nations Development Program estimates that the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year."³ \$13 billion may sound like a hefty sum to you and me, but compared to the economies of the developed world it is a mere drop in the bucket.

Making such investments may be one of our best defenses against terrorism. People on both sides of the aisle recognize this fact. On March 22, 2002, President Bush said, "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror. We fight against poverty because opportunity is a fundamental right to human dignity. We fight against poverty because faith requires it and conscience demands it. We fight against poverty with a growing conviction that major progress is within our reach."⁴

Unfortunately, since this statement was made in 2002, our fight has not been primarily against poverty as a root of terrorism. Instead we've fought with guns and bombs leaving over 2,800 American soldiers dead in Iraq, with 103

dying in October alone. It is absolutely impossible to get accurate figures on the number of Iraqis who have died since the war began. Conservative estimates begin at 44,000 with more liberal reports estimating as high as 655,000. People on both sides of the aisle agree that we need a change in our Iraq policy, but no one seems to have a plan. Will we be a nation that passes by on the other side while our soldiers and Iraqi civilians die or will we come together as a nation to try and find commonsense solutions?

The list goes on and on. So many crucial issues have been glossed over in the smear campaigns of this election season. Will we as a nation pass by while global warming worsens year by year? Will we pass by as gun violence rises and even Amish children in rural Pennsylvania aren't safe? Will we pass by as the genocide in Darfur continues? Will we pass by as more elderly Americans are forced to choose between prescription medicines and food? Are we going to let our elected officials off the hook or are we going to be good stewards of our American citizenship to encourage our government to feed the hungry, provide healthcare to the hurting, and protect our natural resources? God expects us to take care of each other and the world. These issues do not belong to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. These are issues that transcend political parties and yet require their cooperation to move our country and world forward.

Jesus said to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. We love best when, instead of crossing over to the other side of the street, we stop, roll up our sleeves, and begin the healing process with our own two hands. We love best when we take the time to enter a voting booth and use our hands to vote for people who care about eradicating global poverty as a means to peace. We love best when, instead of using canes to beat one another over the head, we instead use them as walking sticks for the disabled and fishing poles for the

hungry. We love best when we follow the ancient Hebrew prophets who urged us to beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. We love best when we make the road from Jerusalem to Jericho safe so that no one gets beat up and robbed there in the first place. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

In peace, we pray to you, Loving God. For all people in their daily life and work, for our families, friends and neighbors, and for those who are alone. For this community, our country, and the world, for all who work for justice, freedom and peace. For the just and proper use of your creation, for the victims of hunger, fear, injustice and oppression. For all who are in danger, sorrow, or any kind of trouble, for those who minister to the sick, the friendless and the needy. For our own needs, and for others for whom you have called us to pray. Hear our prayers, gracious God. For your mercy is great and your steadfast love endures forever. We thank you, Creator God, for all the blessings of life. We exalt you, Wonderful God, and praise your name forever and ever. AMEN.

This prayer was adapted from www.beswick.info/clresources/04A96OS.htm.

¹ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15519404/>

² <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-basics/hunger-basics.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.bread.org/get-involved/one-campaign/Houes-bill.doc>