

## ***Love Your Neighbor: Living Our Christian Values in a Divided Country***

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer.

Back in August, when I volunteered to help lead this service, I did not know the struggle that was to come! I've had a witness brewing in my head for a while now, and I thought it would simply roll out of my head and onto the page. Suffice to say, that is not the process that has unfolded. Our former Pastor, Elissa, graciously agreed to read my first draft and accurately described it as "more of a Ted Talk than a sermon." Fair, for sure. I work in politics, and this past year I'd been inspired by an initiative led by the Chair of the National Governors Association, Governor Spencer Cox of Utah, called "Disagree Better." The first draft of this witness had a lot of statistics and way too much of my resume. What it didn't have was vulnerability and a confession that goes to the heart of the matter.

I generally think of myself as a tolerant, loving, open person. Part of the reason we joined the Old Meeting House is because we are centered in the words of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself." How, then, does that square with the hate in my heart I have felt for President Trump, and some of his close advisors and supporters, since he emerged on the political scene? I say this and I want you to know that this is my heart. I am assuming nothing about the views of those in this room or those watching on YouTube. This witness is about my journey and struggles. It might ring true for some of you – on either side of the political spectrum – and it might not.

"The First commandment is: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Really, Jesus? I'm supposed to love Trump? I'm supposed to love someone who I believe sows fear and division? Who I feel has targeted vulnerable populations such as migrants and transgender men and women? Who I worry has remade in his own avaricious image the Party I worked alongside my entire career? Who refused to acknowledge the results of the last election and incited an insurrection, desecrating the US Capitol and killing a Capitol Police officer? That guy? I've worked all of my life for Republicans, but they were "good" Republicans. Trump's not good. He's evil. You want me to love him?!

True confession, in this sacred space of ours: I have not loved him. I have hated him. I have wished for the worst. How – in any stretch of the imagination - does that square with my Christian values?

Some additional confessions. Since 2015, I have lost touch with relatives who are Trump supporters. I have pulled away, rather than reach out a hand. I have engaged in too many fights to count on social media. I have shared – and sometimes continue to share – nasty memes. I have been condescending and self-righteous and shut people down in conversations, yet blamed others for this denigration in our discourse. Are those actions loving my neighbors as myself?

Most in our little Northeast bubble blame Trump and Republicans for the state of our politics today. Friends in other parts of the country blame Democrats and their political correctness and “culture wars.” Others blame cable news or social media. I believe most of us have played a part and that it’s happened bit by bit, over many years. We have short memories, but politics has been ugly long before Trump. When I was a young staffer in Washington, DC, Democrats blamed Ken Starr and Newt Gingrich for their “witch hunt” against the Clintons. Yet, I still remember challenging a male relative when he tried to dismiss President Clinton’s sexual relations with then-22-year-old Intern Monica Lewinsky as “just sex,” and “not a big deal,” and, “she was pursuing him.” Just try to think of the Democratic President’s actions now, in light of the Me Too Movement. When I worked for President Bush, I remember my parents being invited to a party in Vermont where they burned him in effigy. Yes, that happened. Here in quaint, “peaceful,” Vermont.

I think that’s why I was so excited about Governor Cox’s initiative. I’ve been so exhausted by our divisions and yearning for hope of something better. Governor Cox is a Mormon, a Trump supporter and he signed a bill banning gender-affirming care for minors. He is also one of the most compassionate, hardworking, dedicated public servants I’ve met in my nearly 30-year career. He first impressed me with an inspiring speech he gave following the Pulse Nightclub Shootings. During the 2020 campaign he recorded an amazing PSA with his Democratic opponent. He recently served as Chair of the National Governors Association, and as Chair he spearheaded “Disagree Better.” Here’s a description of the year-long effort, that concluded this summer: “Americans need to disagree better. And by that we don’t mean that we need to be nicer to each other, although that’s helpful. We need to learn to disagree in a way that allows us to find solutions and solve problems instead of endlessly bickering. An ‘exhausted majority’ of Americans want this, and the science is clear about interventions that reduce polarization. As doers and builders, Governors are in a unique position to model what healthy conflict looks like.”

Throughout the year, the initiative highlighted research, best practices and organizations dedicated to reducing polarization. The NGA held debates at colleges across the country, panels with military and civilian leaders and sponsored PSAs where over half of the nation’s Governors recorded messages with elected officials from the opposite party on disagreeing better.

These PSAs were studied by researchers from Stanford University for their Strengthening Democracy Challenge, who found that watching such ads “reduced viewers’ support for undemocratic practices, such as forgoing democratic principles for partisan gain or using violence against members of another party.”

Some of the most powerful information presented was from an organization called “More in Common;” an international initiative to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarization and social division. More in Common studied something called “the Perception Gap,” which occurs when there is a difference between one side’s actual beliefs and the other side’s perception of those beliefs. Their findings were striking. I won’t include all of the statistics that made my first draft more Ted Talk-ish (come find me after if you’re interested), but the main point is that Democrats and Republicans imagine that almost twice as many people on the other side hold extreme views than really do. Overall, Americans’ views are more similar to their political opponents’ than they realize.

I’m not sure exactly why this was so powerful for me, because of course this is true. Our neighbors want much of the same things. We want our communities to be safe. We want our children to grow up and thrive. We want our friends’ cancer to be in remission. We want to be able to pay our bills. We want to help each other in times of need. Ignore the noise from the far Left and the far Right – did you see the helpers in North Carolina asking for someone’s political affiliation before rescuing them from the floods? Did we do that in Vermont this summer and last summer? Would someone’s political views, or what they say and do, ever be a pre-requisite for love and humanity in Jesus’ eyes?

The answer, of course, is no. Why, then, do I still struggle so mightily with this greatest commandment?

I found more help this week from a much closer source, when I went to a talk at the Norwich Public Library given by Erica Heilman, award-winning producer of the Rumble Strip podcast. The talk, sponsored by Vermont Humanities, was titled, “Building Community in Our Divided Society.” In Rumble Strip, Heilman “invites herself into people’s homes to find out what they know, hate, love, what they’re afraid of, and what makes them more like you than you’d realized.” If you listen to Vermont Public, you’ve heard her amazing pieces. Her heartbreaking episode, “Finn and the Bell,” about a teen from Walden who committed suicide, won a Peabody Award.

Heilman said something on Wednesday night that struck me as profoundly spiritual. She said, “there is a kind of radical openness to love, that is very different from ‘like.’” That, even when you love someone or when you love a place – in her case, Vermont – you don’t have to like everything about the person or the place. Love is in the dark places too. She noted, “the quality of community is contingent on how we

commune.” She talked about Town Meeting, and the culture it creates of “profound mutual respect.” She said that her interviews help combat the tendency we have of “experiencing people as ideologies and not people.”

She played a clip from a recent episode titled, “Allison and the Flood.” In it, Plainfield resident Allison Loreen describes the terror and heartbreak of her house and her cat being washed away into the Great Brook during the recent flood this July. At the end of the episode, Heilman asks Allison what she is going to do now? Where will she live because the housing situation is so bad? Allison replies, “It’s really bad because we’ve got millions who shouldn’t be here right now, in my opinion...In a lump sum like that, you can’t handle it – no one can handle millions at a time. And someone’s doing something wrong. Americans should be coming first anyway, because we’re the taxpayers. That’s just how I feel, but there’s nothing I can do, you know, so you either trust God or you don’t.”

Heilman shared a link to a GoFundMe page for Allison along with the piece, and she received a follow-up email from a listener saying essentially, “How dare you give that woman a platform to spew hate, and how dare you ask us to support her flood recovery.” How devastating. Even in Vermont, our willingness to help; our capacity to love our neighbors, is being impacted by politics.

Governor Cox’s effort ended with lots of strategies for how to Disagree Better, which you can find on the initiative website. After her talk, Erica Heilman was asked how she gets people to engage so willingly in conversations and she noted that the ingredients of good interactions with others are humility, curiosity and a sense of humor. Those things can help solve the problems of self-righteousness and othering. That is all helpful, for sure, but as always, we need look no further than our Savior. Break bread. Share wine. Love your God with all your heart and soul and mind and love neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

So, a final exercise, to EXORCISE my demons. Can I practice Jesus’ radical love and openness? Can I follow the greatest commandment? Can I find love in my heart for President Trump? I can try.

I love Donald Trump because he has given me the courage to speak out, when previously I had stayed complicitly silent.

I love Donald Trump because without him Jim and I would not have created our community of Martini Fridays, bringing friends and family closer together.

I love Donald Trump because he has shown that our democracy is vulnerable and cannot be taken for granted.

I love Donald Trump because he has helped expose the divisions in our country – racial, socioeconomic, cultural – that so many who don't live in my privilege have known were there all along.

I love Donald Trump because he has forced me to confront the darker parts of myself. To go deeper. To do the continuous work to become a better Christian.

I love Donald Trump because he is a child of God. Well...it's a start. Amen.