

A lawyer, a doctor, and a preacher decided to go deer hunting together. After a while they sighted a big buck. They fired their guns simultaneously and the buck went down. That's when the trouble started. They couldn't figure out whose shot had actually killed the deer! As a heated debate began, a game warden came upon the group and asked what the problem was. The doctor told him that they were debating whose shot had killed the buck. The warden carefully examined the deer, and then stated confidently that the preacher's shot had killed him! They were all amazed and wondered how he came to that conclusion. "Easy," he said. "The shot went in one ear and out the other!"

I'm preaching about politics this morning and I fear that the impact of what I have to say may be the same as that shot- in one ear and out the other! But I hope not. We're in the midst of an extremely nasty and contentious presidential election campaign. Republican Senator Mitt Romney stated last week, "I'm troubled by our politics, as it has moved away from spirited debate to a vile, vituperative, hate-filled morass that is unbecoming of any free nation." He went on to criticize President Trump for calling Democratic Vice Presidential nominee, Kamala Harris, a "monster," the speaker of the House "crazy," and calling for the Justice Department to put former President Obama in jail. Romney also called out

Speaker Pelosi for publicly tearing up President Trump's State of the Union address, and commentator Keith Olbermann for calling the president a "terrorist."

In a recent column, Chicago Tribune writer, Clarence Page, also lamented our national political descent into rage and hate, dominated by what he called "negative partisanship" in which our political passion is based not so much on our loyalty to our party, as our hatred of the other party. We have begun to see our political rivals as enemies, rather than fellow citizens who have different points of view. That is a dangerous line to cross, because we feel free to be more aggressive and hateful toward someone we consider to be an enemy. And, emotionally unbalanced individuals and aggrieved groups may feel empowered to act with violence against perceived enemies, like those who recently plotted to kidnap the governor of Michigan.

This overheated approach to politics has led to deep divisions even among average Americans like us. Friends and relatives can't even talk about politics now. There is tremendous distrust of the "other side," and we can't even agree on the facts anymore because each side gets their news from their own echo chamber sources. One practical consequence has been our politicized response to the pandemic, which is a non-partisan threat to all of us if there ever was one! Other countries, like Canada, have

been able to pull together and implement common sense measures to fight the virus, keeping their infection rates and number of deaths low, while partisan fighting has hampered us in coming up with a commonly-supported strategy, resulting in far more Covid cases and deaths.

Friends, we have a serious problem on our hands, and it's literally killing us. At the National Prayer breakfast last January, Arthur Brooks, former president of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, spoke about this matter, decrying the plague of contempt in American politics. He defined contempt as the "conviction of the utter worthlessness of another human being." I think Brooks is on to something important. Contempt is the underlying attitude that allows us to treat fellow citizens with whom we happen to disagree in brutal ways. And Christian faith has something to contribute to the conversation at this point.

I point us back to the beginning. All the way back to Genesis chapter one, where we read about the creation of human beings. *Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'*

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;*

male and female he created them.

God blessed them... (Gen. 1:26-28a)

Genesis tells us that God created human beings in his image. Theologians have wrestled with exactly what that means for centuries, but there can be no doubt that it means that we have great intrinsic value, both as a whole species, and as individuals! That understanding of the inherent value of each person forms the underpinning of this country's core beliefs. As our Declaration of Independence proclaims, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

If we are each created in God's image, then we dare not treat another person with contempt, acting as though they have no worth, treating them as less than us. That's the starting point in challenging our current predicament. At a minimum it would keep us from name-calling and other kinds of hateful speech toward and about those with whom we disagree. Clearly, God expects at least that much from us, and more.

In Romans 14, Paul addresses Christians in Rome who were bitterly divided over matters such as what kind of food one can eat and what days one should regard as holy. This stemmed primarily from the division between Jewish Christians, who had been taught from childhood that

certain foods were prohibited, and were revolted by them, and Gentile Christians, who had no such scruples. Here's what Paul tells them:

³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. (Rom. 14:3-4)

Because only the Lord is able to see all things clearly and make judgments that are absolutely just and fair, we have no right to judge or despise the “servants of another.” Instead, we're called to forbearance, tolerance of one another's beliefs and yes, politics. That can be challenging, especially when some of our leaders, amplified by various media, including social media, portray those with whom we differ as our enemies, who are dangerous to us rather than being our neighbors.

The late John McCain demonstrated to us a more biblical approach at a 2008 presidential campaign rally. A woman supporter spoke to him from the crowd, stating that she couldn't vote for Obama, because she couldn't trust him, that she had read that he wasn't a true American, that he was an Arab. McCain, who was shaking his head as she spoke, took the mic from her and said, “No ma'am. He's a decent family man, a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that's what

this campaign is all about.” He continued, “He’s a... person that you do not have be scared of as president... I admire Sen. Obama and his accomplishments, and I will respect him. I want everyone to be respectful...” We’ve come a long way since 2008, haven’t we? I know little about John McCain’s faith, but in that moment, he was portraying Christian character by viewing his opponent as a person of worth, who deserves our respect, although we may disagree on the issues.

Back to Arthur Brooks, who called us out for our contempt of others at the National Prayer Breakfast. Brooks called us to go even further than tolerance and civility. He cited Jesus, who said we must love our enemies! ⁴³*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’* ⁴⁴*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt. 5:43-44)*

Jesus is speaking here about real enemies, like the occupying Roman forces who had the power to make the Jews miserable and to even take their lives! And Jesus says that rather than hate those enemies, we should love them. Now that doesn’t mean we have to have warm, fuzzy feelings toward them. We may never have those kinds of feelings for them. Nor does it mean that we have to pretend to agree with them. But it means that we view them as creatures made in the very image of God, who

deserve our respect, and that we should do the work in our hearts necessary to genuinely wish them well.

I hope these words don't "go in one ear and out the other." Examine your own heart (as I must examine mine) to be sure you aren't harboring contempt for others, and to be sure you are not feeding into the current overheated political environment with your conversations and social media posts. Rather, go in the power of the Holy Spirit and be a force for good in such a way that everyone is respected, valued, and heard, because each of us is made in the very image of God, and you are a picture of Christ in this weary world.

Confession of 1967

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares God's labor of healing the enmities which separate people from God and from each other. Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call.