

#AlternativeFaith: *Rivalry to Righteousness*

Matthew 5:9, 43-48; 7:1-5

This has been another interesting week in our nation's capital. Every few days something new gets added to the craziness that stirs up more controversy and upset (remember the good old days when politicians didn't bother anyone until the next election?).

First was the Second Coming of the Executive Order to ban immigration from now six countries (none of which have actually produced a terrorist to threaten our homeland, mind you, unlike Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, whose citizens we still welcome with open arms); as before, this blunt force order has already garnered a court challenge over its constitutionality, which will likely make the President's heart aTwitter.

The second big bombshell of the week was the Wikileaks release of the CIA's "How-To" manual for hi-tech intelligence gathering around the world which, along with informing our adversaries on how it's done, also will inspire high school computer geeks to hack into everyone's iPhone and Smart TV. By this time next week, we'll go to answer our cellphone and suddenly find ourselves addressing some odious character out of *Game of Thrones* or *Grand Theft Auto*!

The biggest news, however, came with the release of the GOP's replacement for the Affordable Care Act (better known as Obamacare). This has turned into a three-ring circus to say the least, with Democrats whining and complaining that the sky is falling, because they know their signature legislation will be undone and they can't do anything about it. On the other hand, Republicans are wishing this would all go away. How much easier it was to campaign and complain than to fix the health care problems in this country.

Already, Republicans can't agree on the terms and coverage, resulting in multiple versions beginning to emerge. There's the one touted by party leaders called "The American Health Care Reform Act of 2017," enthusiastically referred to as Ryan-care or McConnell-care, or by the Tea Party as, Obamacare Lite. But already this plan has been panned by the AARP, AMA, and the American Hospital Association, among others, for all of its shortcomings and the very lucrative tax breaks for the wealthy at the expense of the poor! And no mention has been made of the projected costs. This could be due to its sudden (and somewhat rushed) arrival out of a Capitol closet because Republican leaders were aghast about another bill authored by one of their own, Pete Sessions of Texas, who introduced his own healthcare proposal on March 1 with the rather self-congratulatory title: "World's Greatest Healthcare Plan of 2017." Admittedly, it's hard to come out with Plan B if the "World's Greatest" one has already taken center stage.

Not to be out-manuevered, the House Freedom Caucus also balked, offering their own version of healthcare that eliminates Medicaid coverage altogether—in fact, it does away with all employer-based health insurance, while proposing "Health Savings Accounts" which offer a tax credit up to \$5000 for individuals to go out into the market and purchase their own insurance. They also want to eliminate most regulations on what health plans must cover. Frankly, you could call their health plan, "*We Don't-Care*", for it promises nothing to anyone other than a few bucks credit on taxes, leaving each person free to decide if they want to pay for healthcare coverage. Of course, for every person who opts out of insurance, we'll get an equivalent number of "Go Fund Me" pages popping up everywhere. That's freedom, of course, without responsibility.

So, here are all these health care plans being bandied about in Washington at the present moment, with very little bipartisan cooperation and negotiation. Healthcare coverage and the politics associated with it are so complicated that everyone is reduced to using epithets referencing any distinctions between them—Obamacare, Ryan-care, McConnell-care, Trump-Care, or We Don't-Care—depending on the version! Of course, by doing that, it becomes a shorthand way to incite partisan rage by associating each plan with the names of their demonized opponents. So, whoever hates Obama automatically rejects the ACA; whoever despises Paul Ryan, Rand Paul, Pete Sessions, or Donald Trump views their plans as toxic. Then, everything gets voted up or down along partisan lines. Who wins? Ultimately, no one—especially the American public.

Partisan politics, as we have become so painfully aware, is pure crazy-making, is it not? The endless rivalry drives sensible people batty. However, politicians know that rivalry actually motivates their base, more than just about anything else. As much as partisan rivalry paralyzes the country, it excites many people, much like competition between sports teams. This has been documented.

Political Scientists, Patrick Miller and Patricia Johnston Conover, co-authored a recent study that described this phenomenon. They analyzed the attitudes of voters from survey data and realized that “loyalty to the party itself was the source of partisan rivalry and incivility instead of a fundamental disagreement over issues.”¹ In other words, it’s not issues that matter, as much as not wanting to lose to the other side. Everything is a game. For partisan diehards, it is even more recklessly clear:

¹ “Most Partisans Treat Politics like Sports Rivalries, Study Shows,” www.news.ku.edu, April 13, 2015.

When it came to uncivil attitudes, 38 percent of partisans agreed that their parties should use any tactics necessary to ‘win elections and issue debates.’ When those who agreed with this view were asked what tactics they had in mind, the most common ones they offered were voter suppression, stealing or cheating in elections, physical violence and threats against the other party, lying, personal attacks on opponents, not allowing the other party to speak and using the filibuster to gridlock Congress. Democrats and Republicans were equally likely to express this opinion. ²

Miller and Conover also noted,

Competitive elections are making you hate the other party more. They’re having a 180-degree opposite effect from what we think they should...Instead of bringing us together to talk and deliberate, they’re making us hateful people who are disengaged from our fellow citizens. ³

Welcome to 21st century America!

Rivalry has moved beyond friendly competition with limited impact to outright tribal warfare on so many fronts—politics only being the most apparent. At the very heart of rivalry is the defeat, if not destruction, of an adversary—sometimes literally, sometimes not. Any engagement becomes a competitive battle for power and control, where the victor seeks not only to win, but often to take down an opponent at any cost. The culture of mass market video games is a circular reflection of this—it promotes rivalry in life and death battles and mirrors what is found in society.

With bitter rivalry, opponents objectify each other—they stereotype with negative caricatures; rivals portray each other as the embodiment of evil that must be overcome in order for good to win—a win for righteousness’ sake. In that spirit, victors are lionized by their followers for their epic success, often showered with religious-like fervor and glory. All of this is terribly ironic, since this mindset is precisely what undermines the cooperative spirit of true community and certainly distorts the nature of

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

biblical righteousness, which isn't about winning, but about being just! The Hebrew word for "righteousness" (צְדָקָה ; *tzdek*) means "just", "innocent," and "one who has not harmed another." To be like God is to exercise power and authority justly and equitably, and with mercy.

I think it's fair to say that one of the key criticisms Jesus leveled at the politics and rivalries of his time was over the matter of righteousness and their dire lack of it. I'm not sure Christian tradition has fully grasped this prophetic social critique either, as down through the ages, "righteousness" has been construed as a feature of religious piety more than anything else, characterized by the virtues of moral purity and personal integrity over and against hypocrisy, deceitfulness, and self-serving evil. Righteousness is often conveyed as being perfect and holy, devoted to God. Martin Luther is quoted as saying, "This life is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness...All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified"—as if righteousness is about disciplining the soul to be removed from and untainted by the world. In a sense, that's true, except righteousness is not something one attains in isolation.

Spiritual righteousness is about human relationships, i.e., relating to others in a just, merciful, honoring and self-giving way. Righteousness is summed up by Micah's famous trinitarian formula: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). This explains why being self-righteous, sanctimonious, or self-justifying is a stark contrast to biblical norms for righteousness. Self-righteousness arises out of the ego, often to justify oneself or one's actions in comparison to another ("I am right!" or "Our beliefs are morally superior to theirs"); righteousness, however, comes from a humble heart and wiser spirit, where one is seeking right, just, and peaceful relations with another.

Righteousness is generous and merciful to others, including adversaries; self-righteousness, however, is not.

Righteousness is what makes it possible to live in peace, or *shalom*, because relationships between people in community are what is vitally important in life—more than economics, more than attaining political power, more than social class. That’s what Jesus was trying to get across. The righteousness that ushers in *shalom* is based in a covenant of mutual trust with God and between people, characterized by impartial yet fair, mutually respectful and honoring, generous and caring interactions and interdependence. Anything that undermines trust, undermines peace. Until the competition for resources is turned into mutual sharing, until power is exercised justly, with special consideration for those lacking it, true peace will remain elusive and will only be mocked by lesser attempts to impose it through law and order. *Peace-keeping* is not the same as *peacemaking*.

For that reason, Jesus considered peacemakers, children of God; they are agents of *shalom*—they represent the spiritual DNA of God embodying the divine intent to heal people and communities through meaningful reconciliation and the cultivation of righteous relationships. The community of Jesus in the early church represented this cooperative, caring *shalom*, as is portrayed in Acts 2 & 4. But something like this isn’t easy to create or maintain without constant checks to foster humility, selflessness, forgiveness, and caring in and among people, because in so many contexts human nature is characteristically selfish and self-serving if left to its own devices.

In a world of clashing tribal identities and interests, rivalries can be toxic and often deadly, as we so often see. On a microscale, we know the

destructive potential of sibling rivalries, leaving families fragmented and estranged. On a wider scale, we see the effects of distrust and negative stereotypes dividing communities into segregated neighborhoods. Of course, on the broadest scale we fear the worst—that there can and will be yet another terrible war—sheer madness, as reflected in that Cold War acronym for “mutually assured destruction” (M.A.D.). The competitive madness has to stop, or at least be balanced by a greater commitment for cooperation. Winning isn’t “everything” as we’re often told, because it has such destructive power in human relations. Competition, instead of being the most important ambition of our world, has to be checked by something even more critical to us, i.e., our best welfare, if not even our survival!

Thus, Jesus’ commandment to love our enemies isn’t an unattainable ideal or naïve aspiration for living in this world. It is the most fundamental check we have on human rivalry and competition to prevent us from demonizing and bullying opponents and hardening our own hearts with arrogance and self-righteousness. Learning how to love enemies is a way forward to overcome hostilities and foster trust and heal relationships destroyed by the crimes of human sin.

As Jesus said, it’s not hard to love those who love you in return; it’s not difficult to be in a covenant of *shalom* and mutual trust with those who share your views and beliefs. But it is a huge challenge to love those who are adversaries, to express a selfless care for them, to generously pray for their best welfare.

This is why we must pray for God’s Spirit to inspire and guide us and for us to draw courage from those who will support us in this endeavor—not surround ourselves with partisans who won’t. When everything seems divided into who’s for us versus who’s against us, to follow Jesus’ teachings

as a disciplined act of spiritual resistance is extremely demanding on our consciences and relationships.

At the same time, though, it is a righteous act to break the cycle of violent words and deeds that rivalry, at its worst, will inspire. To move from rivalry to righteousness in human relationships lies at the heart of so much of what Jesus sought and taught—that his way—*shalom*—is the way, the truth, and the life—that no one will find peace or live into the Spirit of God until they seek righteousness in their relationships and in their engagement with the world.

This is a challenging assignment in 2017, where the divide is deep and the hostilities high. May we take this to heart in these bitterly partisan times (and encourage others to do the same), so that we may reawaken the better angels within us—the very angels who will lighten our spirits and brighten our hopes for a better way and a more cooperative world, and for a divinely-inspired peace on earth that will simply surpass all human understanding.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
12 March 2017