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PRAYER, CIVILITY, AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

WITH ELECTIONS LOOMING, political discourse confronts us just about every day. And in an age of increasing political partisanship, it seems that just about anything goes regarding the tone of discussion in the political arena. In the news media, reasoned discussion often takes a backseat to confrontation, which spurs interest (and maybe profits). A recent op-ed piece I read even extolled the virtues of public figures expressing their opinions bluntly and with no apology.

While confrontation and controversy may be entertaining, it is doubtful that it does much for public enlightenment. In fact, it frequently leads in just the opposite direction.

Some years ago while I was working in the political campaign arena, there were often discussions about the effectiveness of negative campaigning. While it wasn't widely regarded as the "high road," it was considered a highly effective tool in swaying public opinion. In a sense, went the argument, it was something the public would tolerate. Negative attack campaigning has been defined by the Institute for Global Ethics as "arguments based on rumor or innuendo, that rely on unflattering or demeaning representations to get their point across, that rely on stereotyping and appeals to fear or prejudice, and that typically focus on personalities rather than on issues." It is hard to believe that's really what the public wants—and, in fact, some polling suggests that we are getting tired of it. That trend is worth nurturing, and it's one where prayer can play a big part.

Prayer is more than asking God to do something that seems out of our control. Demonstrable prayer begins with trying to understand the divine nature, and then committing to live that nature in our daily lives. For instance, many of the world's wisdom traditions agree that the essence of this divine nature includes truth and love. The Bible's representation of this divine essence includes the encouragement to "go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37).

A prayer wouldn't make much sense if there were recognition of what the standard was and then neglect to follow it. Mary Baker Eddy, a recognized leader of religious thought, wrote this about unceasing prayer in *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*: "Such prayer is answered, in so far as we put our desires into practice." She went on to point out that

Jesus' injunction was "that we pray in secret and let our lives attest our sincerity" (p. 15).

There's a reasonable approach to letting our prayers change political discourse. By committing to put the divine nature of Truth into play in our lives, we can exercise higher standards of thought and communication. We can let Truth shape our presentation of our ideas so that they exhibit more balance and less hyperbole. We can strive to see wisdom, even in ideologies with which we disagree. We can reject the self-righteous argument that one's point of view is "the truth," even if others don't get it. Most important, we can commit to listen to divine Truth itself.

Centuries ago a new political leader named Solomon struggled to follow in the footsteps of his father, David, a giant in the political history of his country. David had united the tribes of Israel into one nation, and now Solomon had to carry forward. His approach was not self-righteous but prayerfully humble. Knowing the inadequacy of human ideology, Solomon prayed to God, "Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" (1 Kings 3:9).

By committing to living the divine nature of Love, we can soften the tenor of attitudes and keep focused on ideas rather than personalities. By valuing the spiritual integrity of others, even if we disagree with them politically, we can emphasize in thought another's connection with and expression of the divine nature, and thus give free expression to development and growth on everyone's part. We can reject appeals to stereotyping and prejudice, or efforts to demonize or marginalize another for the purpose of undercutting a point of view.

As we lift others up in our prayers, we allow for spiritual growth that just might change the course of events. Jesus once elected to stay with an unpopular public figure, the tax collector Zacchæus. By seeing through human opinion and reputation and holding to Zacchæus' true spiritual nature, Jesus elicited this response: "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (Luke 19:8).

If prayer can cause such a huge change in attitude, just think of the effect it can have on political civility today. **css**

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