

What a time to be a pastor/preacher... an election week (let's hope it only lasts a week!) filled with polarization and many friends and family not talking! Most preachers will avoid taking a side (and may even be legally bound to do so). But on the other hand, from the Moral Majority of the Reagan 1980's to the current wave of Christian nationalism, and with the ongoing "social justice" emphasis of the United Church of Christ, many acknowledge that the Christian faith does indeed address the public arena. Dr. Cornel West, prominent black theologian, says "Justice is what love looks like in public!" Other church leaders have often said we cannot have peace without justice, so peacemakers are always working towards a "just peace."

So I will begin this message with sharing what I just wrote to our Newburyport Daily News (Local ministers have a rotation, and it happened to be my "turn" to write a column, which will appear on Friday (not by Tuesday!))

*As we look to new elected leaders in our country (I have no idea the results of Nov. 5 as I write this!), we undoubtedly need communal healing from extremism and division... not only in our government, but also among friends and family. As a follower of Jesus (I speak for myself, not for the whole church), I lean toward certain scripture verses that I think are most relevant. One central teaching of Jesus was that we are called to be Peacemakers. In the famous Sermon on the Mount he says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called "children of God." Peacemaking is hard work. It is repudiating violent words or actions. It is biting the tongue, listening perhaps more than we speak. It is building bridges, not building walls.*

*When asked what was the most important commandment, Jesus said it is to Love... to Love God, and to Love our neighbor as*

*we love ourselves. There as been far too much fear, stereotyping, and demonizing of neighbors. Jesus gave an example of who is a "neighbor" in the Good Samaritan parable. In that teaching, it is anyone in need. It is fascinating that the hero, the one who showed compassion and offered help was a "Samaritan," often shunned in that day as a foreigner with a foreign religion. Compassion on anyone in need also is expressed in his famous parable of the sheep and the goats, also known as the "Last Judgment." He is clear that when we welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked etc, we are doing so to him, to his own spirit. This was the way of entrance into the "Kingdom of God."*

*And speaking of the "kingdom" of heaven, he comments on rulers this world. He says the rulers of other nations "lord it over them; their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you (my followers); whoever would be great among you must be your servant." He demonstrated this servant spirit to his followers by washing their feet at his Last Supper.*

*We remember that the prophet Samuel warned that "kings" are likely to "take the best of your fields and vineyards" and take them for his own use and give them to his own officials. Sounds like greed, or the "love of money" as Paul said. This reminds us of another one of Jesus' central teachings... that we cannot serve God and Mammon (Money) at the same time. Yes, we all need shelter and food, but too often, accumulating lands and possessions comes at the expense of others. We were recently reminded of this on Indigenous Peoples Day, how our ancestors pushed Native Americans off these lands to colonize and build our homes here.*

*The Psalms that Jesus knew and recited are always talking about liberating people. Similarly, when Jesus states his mission in Luke 4, he says he has come to proclaim "good news to the poor"*

*and to “set at liberty those who are oppressed.” Many want to limit Jesus’ words to individual salvation. But it is clear from Jewish history and sociological studies that entire nations or groups of people can be systemically enslaved or oppressed.*

*So we, and elected leaders, are called to hear the cries of any oppressed group, to take their complaints seriously, and put a stop to oppression and violence. And to paraphrase Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, “violence cannot cast out violence, only light can do that!” So we must have leaders who rule by light and truth, not by force and domination.*

So, whoever will be elected this upcoming week, we can pray that they are led by light and truth-telling, and that there will be no need for a forceful transition of power; may the transition be *peaceful!*

To love one’s neighbor, even one’s enemy, as Jesus taught, was shown so beautifully by Rev. Martin Luther King in the 60’s. He said, “In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not lose faith in our white brothers and sisters.” This is faith in the goodness or at least good potential in every human being.

To love one’s neighbor ... was shown by a black South Carolina state trooper named Leroy Smith, shortly after the killing of 9 African Americans in Charleston SC. Leroy Smith, at a Confederate flag rally, was guiding an older white supremacist with heat exhaustion to a seat to find rest. A photo of it went viral, and Leroy said he helped the man out of love, and hoped the image would help society move beyond hate and violence.

One of the strongest voices for loving, even one’s enemy, has come from the disciple of Rev. King, the late congressman from Georgia, John Lewis (Recall that he was beaten on the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965, seeking the right to vote, a day known

as Bloody Sunday). He insists that the Civil Rights movement was a work of *Love*. He explains that for months prior to any sit-in or march, they would study the Bible and Ghandi and Henry David Thoreau on Civil Disobedience. They pledged themselves to disciplines of courtesy and good conduct ... kindness, eye contact, coat and tie, no unnecessary words. As with the song from the South Pacific, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" ("to hate and fear, to be afraid of people whose skin is a different shade"), John Lewis said, "*You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of non-violence. In the bosom of every human being, there is a spark of the divine. So you don't have a right as a human to abuse that spark of the divine in your fellow human being.*"

A half century after that bloody Sunday in Selma Alabama, that march for the right to vote, there are still efforts to make it difficult for citizens in certain regions of our country to vote. Just a few years back, we remember that it was outlawed in Georgia to give food or water to those who were waiting in long, hot voting lines! Compare with Newburyport, where I was able to vote early at the Senior Center with no wait at all! Any bonafide citizen should be *encouraged* to vote with many possibilities: early, absentee, or day of, whatever!

Friends, we are far from the "Beloved Community" that Rev. King envisioned, and to which Jesus called us. The work of loving every neighbor, even enemies, treating them as fairly or "equitably" as possible, will always be an unfinished work, yet a work that we must continually pursue! Loving our neighbor is a direct result of loving our God. These are the two greatest commandments; they are the priorities of God. Amen.