

Our Pledge

On July 4, 2012, we were with Jo Lynn's sister and brother-in-law, Barbara and Dick Bale, visiting a cousin in Fairbanks, Alaska. Barbara and Dick had a Fourth of July tradition of watching the movie version of the musical, "1776," so, we all watched it together, and Jo Lynn and I adopted the tradition for ourselves.

The Tony Award winning musical is based on the events surrounding the drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence. Not all the colonial representatives favored Independence. Some were very comfortable financially, and didn't want to jeopardize their status-quo. Other's feared the loss of property and life in the military struggle that, in fact, already was beginning.

The debate went back and forth with varying degrees of intensity—even to the point of physical altercation. Of course, the Declaration of Independence was adopted, there was a war for independence, which the colonists won... And here we are.

But the debate has never been resolved, nor has its intensity decreased. Aaron Burr fatally shot Alexander Hamilton in one of many pistol duels; even Abraham Lincoln came within moments of a duel with James Shields.

I understand that democracy thrives on vigorous debate; indeed, I enjoy a good debate. And I understand and appreciate the advantage of two or more political parties promoting their vision of the American Dream.

What bothers me to the point of heartache is the lack of civility and respect that has characterized the debate; a trend that seems to be increasing daily to the point that our nation has become a house divided. Hatred, disrespect, insult, ridicule and intolerance characterize the overwhelming majority of encounters between individuals or groups that have any level of disagreement—and some expressions of Christianity are out front, leading the animosity.

I am persuaded that that divisiveness characterizes the greatest expression of human sin in the twenty-first century. I say that because it is the absolute opposite of God's vision and purpose for God's creation. Isaiah paints a beautiful word picture of God's desire and intention for God's children: (Isaiah 11:1-9 NRSV)

*¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

*²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;*

*⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

*⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

*⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

*⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

What a radical contrast with the belligerent divisiveness that is so visible in our culture. Some people are blaming social media; but I believe Facebook and Twitter and Instagram are only barometers—yardsticks—that measure the viciousness that was growing before social media took over. Much of the conflict and belligerence that characterizes our culture today emerges out of a contrasting set of presumptions that pretty much always have been in place.

Walter Brueggemann, at age 83, in my estimation remains America's premier non-Jewish Old Testament scholar, and is among the most influential of the last several decades. He suggests that the Old Testament is presented in a testimony/counter testimony format—not unlike a courtroom debate.

One side of the debate sees God as territorial, vengeful and blood-thirsty; a warrior calling for genocide, dashing babies' heads against rocks and disemboweling pregnant women! God demands absolute loyalty and obedience, and is brutal in punishing disloyalty and disobedience. This perspective is the more ancient of the two sides, probably the residue of pagan superstitions that surrounded the Israelites and continued to influence the practice of their faith.

Based upon this testimony, these are the applicable human responses:

1. Focus on what is wrong and correct it. Idealists and visionaries are not to be trusted.
2. Don't let anybody get away with anything. Punish the guilty at all costs, even if, in the process, some of the innocents are wrongfully punished [e.g., how often have we read about a prisoner being released after serving part of a sentence for a crime it turns out he or she didn't commit.]

On the other side of the courtroom the counter-testimony relates to Melchizedek, the mysterious figure who blesses Abram in Genesis 14 and to whom the risen Christ is compared in Hebrews 7. **Melchizedek** is the "King of Salem" (or Shalom); and it's interesting that in one rabbinic interpretation Messiah would be called "Prince of Peace (Shalom)".

This second side of the debate was largely ignored until the 8th century prophets begin to proclaim a monotheistic faith: one God, universal for all nations of the world. The language and vocabulary used by these prophets is medical, rather than legal, and proclaims a God whose relationship with humanity is loving and healing, rather than vindictive and punishing. These later prophets called for justice in place of sacrifice and mercy in place of ritual incantations.

Based upon this counter-testimony, the applicable human responses are:

1. Envision the ideal, and work to make it happen.
2. Innocent until proven guilty; due process for all
3. Protect the innocent at all costs, even if, in the process, some of the guilty slip through the cracks and go scot free.

Different factions of Judaism adapted these contrasting perspectives into their expectations regarding the Messiah; and Jesus took sides in the debate. Jesus chose the counter-testimony of the later prophets, and proclaimed a God of love and peace and restoration; a God who heals the brokenness of humanity and restores the broken relationship between God and God's creation. Jesus took sides.

Emerging initially from the anti-bullying movement, a pledge took shape, taking multiple forms and being promoted by several groups. Last July, after prayerful preparation, we came together to discern God's will for our congregation. As a part of that process we looked at some of those pledges, and considered whether they might be a viable expression of our calling as a congregation.

We noted that most of the pledges were stated negatively; that is, they noted what they were "against." We preferred to create a more positive statement. Here is the one we chose to consider. It's from a group called, "Not in Our Town": "I pledge to stand up to all forms of hate, bigotry and bullying. I will not stay silent in the face of intolerance based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, ability or any other factor. I will work together with my neighbors to create safer, more inclusive communities for all."

Our Version—instead of what we oppose, states what we support: "I pledge to stand up for respect, love, compassion and peaceful resolutions to conflict. I will recognize and support the value of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, ability or any other factor. I will work together with my neighbors to create safer, more inclusive communities for all."

It is our intention to align our values, beliefs, vision and purpose with the

Will of God by holding them up to the yardstick of Scripture—like the one I read earlier.

Now, before we break our arms patting ourselves on the back, these are ideals. They are commendable only to the degree that we put them into practice, as our Missional Purpose puts it, by “reaching out proactively through the gifts and resources of our people to administer wholeness in a fragmented world.”

Wholeness. Shalom. God's intention for Creation and for all God's Children: a time when...

***The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.***