

FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Worst Ever!

Many are proclaiming that this year's campaign is the worst ever, most uncivil, and full of name-calling and bluster. Chuck Lorre, in his Vanity Card #539 at the end of *The Big Bang Theory*, may have said it for all of us: "A Nonpartisan, Nondenominational prayer for America. God, make this election be over soon. Amen." The candidates seem to hurl a variety of insults, insinuations, and, yes, sometimes lies at each other, with the hope that something will stick in the voters' minds as the one thing that sways more opinions. It has seemed to be the most uncivil campaign season ever.

Yet, it may not measure up to the campaign of 1828, when Andrew Jackson was running against John Quincy Adams, the incumbent. In that campaign, Adams was accused of providing a Russian czar with a young American woman's time and sexual favors. In essence, he was accused of being a pimp. Meanwhile, Jackson's wife, Rachel, was accused of being "a convicted adulteress" and a bigamist because it wasn't clear whether her divorce was final from a previous marriage before she married Jackson. Between the election and Jackson's inauguration, Rachel died. In his inaugural speech, Jackson blamed those who raised the bigamy charges as being responsible for her death. He said, "May God Almighty forgive her murderers, as I know she forgave them. I never can."

Presidential political seasons always seem to be rough and tumble, even more than lower-level elections. The stakes are high—the highest office in the land—and in many minds that justifies the incivility, the win-at-all-costs lies, and the name-calling. Some would justify all actions by saying that the campaign is equivalent to war because the stakes are so high. Even war, however, has its limits.

The 2016 election season has been especially vitriolic. How does Christian faith inform how we treat one another when we disagree? How can Christians be witnesses of civility when the election is over?

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Core Bible Passages

In **Matthew 7:1-12**, Jesus calls his followers to accountability for behaviors toward one another. Civility is implicit in **verse 12**, known as the Golden Rule. It says, “Treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you.” Practicing the Golden Rule would turn upside down the rules of engagement in the political arena, as well as how we behave in everyday interactions. What we most often witness is one paying back what has been received, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, if not two eyes for an eye.

Matthew 5:43-48 is a profoundly difficult teaching of Jesus: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (**verse 44**, NRSV). If we are truly to love our enemies, that will impact how we behave in our social interactions and in the political arena. To love our enemies means we will seek to see the best in them, not demonize them simply because we disagree, and we will seek to understand their point of view.

Both parties in this year’s election are understanding that there are several groups within our society who aren’t being heard. We’re truly much more able to hear and understand the other when we claim Jesus’ way of blessing those mentioned in the Beatitudes in **Matthew 5:1-11**.

What’s Lost?

Kyrsten Sinema, a member of the House of Representatives from Arizona, was quoted as saying, “I’m very concerned about the tone of politics in recent years. We’ve seen a decline in civility and bipartisanship, and a rapid increase in hostility between those who have differing opinions. I think this has led to the alienation of the public in governance, which jeopardizes democratic participation.” In that view, incivility leads to a lack of ability to work together (bipartisanship), hostility, and, ultimately, an apathy of the citizens who are required to make democracy function well. In some sense, one might say that democracy is, therefore, broken. Indeed, in recent years, working together with those across the aisle seems to be anathema to both major political parties.

When one speaker interrupts another and both speak at the same time, no one can be understood. It’s hard to respect any candidate who spends a lot of time in name-calling and labeling, as those are common practices of bullies on the playground. When the issues facing our country aren’t the primary topic of discussion, we aren’t likely to find solutions to those problems. These are just three common acts of politicians that hamper the democratic process.

Another Way—Civility

Civility is a way of relating to one another that enhances civic discourse, which allows us to seek solutions to problems together and which allows everyone’s voice to be heard. The Institute for Civility in Government (ICG) says, “Civility is about more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one’s preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. It is political in the sense that it is a necessary prerequisite for civic action. But it is political, too, in the sense that it is about negotiating interpersonal power such that everyone’s voice is heard, and nobody’s is ignored.”

If we’re part of that apathetic electorate, we’re likely to want nothing to do with politics. However, politics, at its core, is about how we make decisions in any group for the group. Unless we live entirely as hermits, we cannot avoid being involved in politics in some way, shape, or form. Therefore, we as Christians can practice political civility in the midst of our everyday lives. And, if part of our discipleship training were to be training in civility, the church could impact the larger society in a powerful way. One of the major contributions the church can make to larger society is to model the process by which we make decisions.

Political Insults

Political insults under the guise of humor and satire have long been part of our culture. How do such insults affect civility and the Christian witness to love of neighbor?

In the video “Is Civility Important?” Stephen Carter says that what most people think of concerning the incivility of politics are name-calling and insults of the opponent. Many of those insults or names are simply repeated over and over in a tired and lazy way. Yet, he says, some insults are quite clever and actually honor the other person enough to have given some thought to them.

He told the story of Disraeli, a British politician in the 19th century, who was asked about the difference between a misfortune and a calamity and replied, “If Gladstone,” one of his political opponents and a former prime minister, “fell in the river, that would be a misfortune. But if anybody pulled him out, that would be a calamity.”

Another nice tongue-in-cheek insult is from Assistant Secretary of the Navy Teddy Roosevelt on President William McKinley: “No more backbone than a chocolate éclair.” And then there was Pat Buchanan on Bill Clinton: “Bill Clinton’s foreign policy experience is pretty much confined to having had breakfast once at the International House of Pancakes.” George H. W. Bush famously appreciated the impressions of him done by Dana Carvey on *Saturday Night Live*.

These zingers make a point, get a laugh, and often have the politicians laughing along. But the question remains: How do they affect civility?

Practicing Civility

Politeness is the grease for the wheels of interpersonal relationships. When we practice everyday politeness, many personal interactions are much smoother, preventing unnecessary conflict and disagreement. When someone practices politeness as a norm, we often call that person “graceful.” For us as Christians, to be filled with grace is a good witness. At the same time, being polite doesn’t mean we don’t express ourselves with confidence when we have disagreements with others.

Disagreeing without disrespect is a second component of civility. We often feel that if we speak harshly and rudely, we’re winning our points and that we’re showing our strength. That sort of disrespect of the other, however, can lead to a defensive posture that easily can shut down communication. Stephen Carter, author of the book *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*, says, “Civility represents the sum of all the sacrifices that one makes in a democracy for the sake of living a common life.” One of the sacrifices that we make would be not always to need to win points and show strength. Another sacrifice is to treat others who have different ideas respectfully, when, honestly, they just make us angry.

In a video called “Is Civility Important?” Carter relates a story about Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, who spent decades as a civil rights lawyer earlier in his career. As Justice Marshall reflected on his career, he would say “wonderfully nice things, and apparently mean them” about even those who had been strong advocates for segregation. When asked about how that could be, he replied that one could be wrong on a particular issue, but that doesn’t make that person any less human.

The opposite of respect is demonizing the adversary, which is a popular political tool. This makes an opponent seem less than human, even demonic, simply because that person is on the other side of an issue. That’s one way in which we disrespect those with whom we disagree.

Staying present in conversation is difficult to do, especially when it’s a free-flowing debate and it’s quite easy to get caught up in formulating our next answer. Part of the sacrifice of civility is that we listen and seek to understand, even when someone is expressing views that are antithetical to our core beliefs, which may even nauseate us. One line of the Prayer of Saint Francis is “O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek . . . to be understood, as to understand.” Very few guests on today’s news shows seek more to understand than to be understood.

If civility means we make sacrifices in order to live a common life, we will often be countercultural. If we go about politely, respectfully, listening to others, seeking to understand the other’s points of view, even when we strongly disagree, then we will change the world—or at least our part of it.

The Prayer of Saint Francis

This ancient prayer, attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, embodies the notion of civility. Coming before God in this prayer, we open ourselves to the transforming work of God. Love, particularly love even for those who may hate us, is the beginning of God's work in us. This prayer points to the wisdom that Christian teaching offers to all of us about how we can interact with one another.

Practicing each of these requested characteristics moves us closer to a grace-filled life, humble and seeking truly to understand the other. If you were to picture one whose spirit is in sync with this prayer, you would have a good summary of what civility is.

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

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United Methodist Perspective

“Our Social Principles: Political Responsibility” in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012* addresses how we relate to one another politically: “The strength of a political system depends upon the full and willing participation of its citizens. The church should continually exert a strong ethical influence upon the state, supporting policies and programs deemed to be just and opposing policies and programs that are unjust” (§164.B).

A primary role of the church is to exert a moral and an ethical influence—in this case, to embody what it means to interact civilly. As our Social Principles emphasize the full and willing participation of its citizens, it's important that the interactions of Christians in the marketplace of ideas be civil, providing the grease that lubricates the difficult interactions when we disagree.

In John Wesley's Sermon 22, “Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse Two,” he proclaims that love doesn't behave itself unseemly and isn't rude or willingly offensive to anyone. It renders to each individual all that is due, fear or honor to some, but courtesy, civility, and humanity to all the world, honoring all people. Wesley saw that love is the central motivation to civility and that civility and courtesy were a birthright to all persons.

Helpful Links

- For more information about the resources provided by the Institute for Civility in Government, visit their website at <http://www.instituteforcivility.org/>.
- Stephen Carter's video “Is Civility Important?” can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/20256014>.

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Civility and Christian Faith

How can Christians be
witnesses of civility?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your
group members and
your group time,
choose from among
the OPEN, EXPLORE,
and CLOSE activities
or from "Teaching
Alternatives" to plan
the session.

OPEN the Session

Create a Graffiti Sheet

Place a large sheet of paper or posterboard in a visible location for all to see. Be sensitive to anyone who may be physically limited as you place it. Have markers nearby.

Remind the group that this session isn't meant to make a case for a particular candidate. It's about how we present our views and how we treat one another, even when we disagree. Invite participants to write or draw something that expresses their feelings about the presidential campaign. Tell them they'll have an opportunity to say something about what they've written or drawn in a few moments.

Pray Together

Lord, help us to shine the light of love into your world by being an example for others of how to live civilly. May we speak when we need to speak but speak with respect. May we listen well, seeking to understand the point of view of others. May we be filled with grace in all of our interactions this week. Amen.

EXPLORE the Topic

Discuss "Worst Ever!"

Invite anyone who would like to do so to talk about what they wrote or drew on the markerboard in the opening activity. Remind them again that the activity is intended to name feelings rather than to promote or denigrate candidates.

Read or review highlights of "Worst Ever!" Ask: How do you respond to Chuck Lorre's prayer for America? Do you think all actions are justified when the stakes are high? Why or why not? What do you think the ideal political debate would be like? What can Christians do to encourage a better political campaign or debate?

Talk About Political Insults

Read or review highlights of "Political Insults." Ask: What feelings or thoughts do you have about these insults from past elections? Do you think they're funny? Why or why not? How do you respond to the comment that a clever insult honors the other person? Do you think this kind of thing contributes to civility? Why or why not?

Reflect on "What's Lost?"

Read or review highlights of "What's Lost?" Point out that three problematic behaviors are mentioned in this section: interrupting and speaking over the other person, name-calling and labeling, and not speaking about the issues facing our country. Ask: How do you think these practices hamper the democratic process? Can you think of other common practices of candidates or campaigns that make it difficult for candidates to have civil discussions? What common political practices make it difficult to discern for whom you should vote? Do you agree that these practices cause apathy among the American people? Why or why not? Do you ever experience any of these negative behaviors in your everyday life? Are there any that you practice that you would like to stop?

Define Civility

Write the word “civility” on a markerboard. Invite participants to write words or phrases on the markerboard that the word suggests to them or that they think defines *civility*. Form teams of two or three, and write a one-sentence definition of *civility*. Invite the teams to share their definitions with the reassembled group.

Read or review highlights of “Another Way—Civility.” Ask: What thoughts or feelings do you have about the opening sentence in this section? about the content from the Institute for Civility in Government? How does the content of this section inspire or challenge you? What would you add to your team’s definition of *civility*?

Have a Bible Study

Form three teams. Assign Matthew 5:1-11 to Team One, Matthew 5:43-48 to Team Two, and Matthew 7:1-12 to Team Three. Ask the teams to read their assigned Scripture passages and the material about them in “Core Bible Passages.” Have them discuss the following questions: What does the passage say to you about civility? How does the passage inspire you? How does it challenge you? What do you think our world would be like if everyone followed these teachings? After a few moments, have the teams share highlights of their discussions with the reassembled group. Ask: How would living out these insights from Jesus change the political climate? How would it change our way of making decisions in our families, workplaces, or communities?

Consider “Practicing Civility”

Read or review highlights of “Practicing Civility.” Focus on three aspects of civility: being polite, disagreeing without disrespect, and staying present in the conversation. Ask: How would the practice of these basic ideas of civility change the way our political campaigns and debates are carried out? Which of these aspects of civility are most difficult for you to carry out? Why? What other aspects of civility can you identify (for example: assuming the best of the other and not the worst or seeking and sharing a commonality with one another)? Write their ideas on the markerboard.

Discuss “United Methodist Perspective”

Read or review highlights of “United Methodist Perspective.” Ask: What does this material say to you about ways the church can encourage civil behavior? How does it speak to you about ways Christians can model civil behavior in the political processes and in daily life? How do Wesley’s views inspire you or challenge you?

CLOSE the Session

Make a Commitment to Civility

Give each participant an index card and a pencil or pen. Ask them to prayerfully consider one way they’ll practice civility during the week ahead. Have them write a one-sentence commitment to that practice on the index card. Ask them to carry the card with them as a reminder.

Pray Together

Read aloud the opening paragraph in the sidebar “The Prayer of Saint Francis.” Invite the group to pray aloud the prayer.

Teaching Alternatives

- If you have Internet access and screens or can view yourself prior to the session, explore the website for the Institute for Civility in Government (see “Helpful Links”). Invite participants to explore the various pages on the website. Ask: What insights about civility do you gain from this website? What might help you in your efforts to be more civil as you interact with others? Review the blog entries. Invite participants to consider what they might add as a blog entry on their experience with civility.
- If you have Internet and screen access, view part or all of Stephen Clark’s video “Is Civility Important?” (see “Helpful Links”) and discuss the video as a group.

Next Week in
FaithLink
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Worldwide Education for Girls

Let Girls Learn is a US initiative to help adolescent girls all over the world get the education they deserve. First Lady Michelle Obama has lent her name to this effort. Why is this issue important to Mrs. Obama, and what other causes have First Ladies supported? As Christians, how can we support quality education for all girls?