

From the Bishop

The Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i



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A New Year's Reflection for the Diocese of Hawai'i

by The Rt. Rev. Robert L. Fitzpatrick

My dear Siblings in Christ Jesus,

The new year is upon us and it is shaping up to be quite a ride. Nationally, we are facing an impeachment trial of the President and a major election. Here in the Islands, disagreements will arise about Mauna Kea and other land use, the rising incidents of gun violence and what to do, and how to address the high cost of living. There are many other points of conflict.

I have been ruminating on how we as Christians are called to engage others in times of disagreement. Though this has been provoked by differing political and community perspectives within congregations and families, I think the principles apply to life. My thoughts below were shaped by a rereading of the Letter of James with some side comments from Paul (Romans 12). In the Biblical quotes below, I have used the translation found in the Common English Bible.

Source of Wisdom

“But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate. They should ask in faith, without doubting.” James 1:5-6

I hope we all agree that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we start with God. As the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, we use Scripture, Tradition and Reason to engage questions facing the world. We do not start with our own desires, appetites or presuppositions. We are open to being challenged by Scripture, the Church (past, present and future) and the reasoned persuasion of others. We seek the wisdom of God knowing that human wisdom is transitory and limited.

Humility

“Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good

actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.” James 3:13-18

“But he gives us more grace. This is why it says, God stands against the proud, but favors the humble.” James 4:6

“Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart. Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.” Roman 12:16-17

This may seem to be basic, but humility is a profoundly Christian virtue. We ought not assume we are better or smarter than the person with whom we disagree. We have to begin by giving the other the benefit of the doubt. We don’t begin by questioning their motives, their character or their identity. We don’t argue to puff ourselves up or to put others down. In our words and actions, we do not contribute to hate and violence.

Anger

“Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn’t produce God’s righteousness. Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.” James 1:19-21

I am increasingly convinced that anger is too often the product of stunted emotional development, self-loathing and/or a biological condition (that hopefully can be treated). Angry outbursts are a mark of failure or illness. Most deeply, anger arises from a place of fear. Is it any wonder that Jesus so often reminds us: “don’t be afraid?” I’m not saying there is no place for righteous indignation in the face of injustice, but that is not the same as “anger.” One can face evil and injustice with calm and love. Yes, the price may be high, but it is the way of Christ Jesus.

Watch Your Tongue

“We all make mistakes often, but those who don’t make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity. Like a bridled horse, they can control themselves entirely. When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies. Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly. Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell.” James 3:2-6

Yes, this was something we were supposed to have learned in kindergarten but is worth a reminder. In local terms, you don’t talk stink. While we shouldn’t respond in anger, we shouldn’t demonize or judge others. We can disagree about policy or events, but that can be done without attacking. As Christians, we know all other people as created in the image of God.

Boasting and Favoritism

“But now you boast and brag, and all such boasting is evil. It is a sin when someone knows the right thing to do and doesn’t do it. Pay attention, you wealthy people! Weep and moan over the miseries coming upon you. Your riches have rotted. Moths have destroyed your clothes. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you. It will eat your flesh like fire.” James 4:16-5:3

“You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself. But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker.” James 2:8-9

More broadly, I think the issue with boasting and favoritism is that they put others down. We must be careful to not puff ourselves up and, by doing so, put others down. No one is perfect.

Mercy

“True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.” James 1:27

“There will be no mercy in judgment for anyone who hasn’t shown mercy. Mercy overrules judgment.” James 2:13

“Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying.” Romans 12:13-15

I find the sense of mercy to be core to our life in Christ. Mercy is the compassionate treatment of those in distress. It is best described in Matthew 25:31-44. During times of disagreement, we must treat others with the same level of mercy.

Live at Peace

“If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. Don’t try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. It is written, Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord. Instead, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head. Don’t be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.” Romans 12:18-21

In the end, we are to witness, as the followers of the Prince of Peace, to the possibility of peace even in the face of disagreement and conflict.

In the end, I know others will not live by these principles. In an age of soundbites and Tweets, it is easy to stray onto the way of anger and, even hate. It is not the Way of Love. I hope that we will keep to the Way of Love even in disagreement.

As Paul urges us in 2nd Corinthians 5:17-20: “So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through

Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us." We are free to act in love, even when we disagree.

Your servant in Christ Jesus,

+Bob

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