

Homily – The Heart of Democracy

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I have one sibling, a younger brother named Robby, and we've always been close. At two years apart we're close in age; we look almost identical; and our names even kind of rhyme. Robby and Molly, Molly and Robby.

When we were small we would play endless games of pioneer adventurer, and Barbies (my choice) and Power Rangers (his choice) and school (my choice). And everything was well and good, until inevitably someone would get shoved in the laundry hamper, or splattered with mud or punched in the arm. "Mom! He hit me!"

And sometimes we were truly terrible to each other – like the time I gave Robby a glass of red wine vinegar and told him it was strawberry pop. He was known to chug strawberry pop, and let's just say the result of chugging vinegar was not pretty.

Needless to say, our close relationship was not immune to the occasional shouting match: Nincompoop! Snot breath! Smelly Pants! I know you are but what am I?!

And every time we would really get into it – steaming with anger and frustration at one another, my Mom would do something genius. She would sit us down at the table, and tell us we had to stay at the table with our noses pressed together until we could be friends again.

Now, I don't know if you've ever sat nose to nose with someone for an extended period of time. But I challenge you at any age and any level of anger to sit with your face on someone else's face in that way without eventually dissolving into laughter. It's just a ridiculous thing to do.

Sometimes I think our country would run a lot better if our leaders were forced to do the same. Can you imagine it? John Boehner and Nancy Pelosi, nose to nose. The president and congress forced to stay at the table – forbidden from walking away. Claire McCaskill and Todd Akin, actually looking into one another's eyes.

Can you imagine what an injection of real human encounter could do to our political system? How much better off we would be, surrounded by warm laughter and sincere respect? You can't sit nose to nose with someone and deny their humanity at the same time. It just doesn't work.

These days talk of respectful engagement seems like magical thinking or naivete. Our system is too polarized, and we are all too disillusioned. And yet, if *we* walk away from the table – if *we the people* give up the ghost - caving and joining into the trends of dehumanizing the opponent in any situation, then we truly are doomed.

A study out of Allegheny College called *Nastiness, Name-calling, & Negativity* puts a point on this fact in their interpretive materials. The authors write: "A core finding of our study is the potential long-term danger posed by the conduct of contemporary politics. We believe our study signals a warning: Americans do not like the way we are 'doing politics,' and they believe hostility and vitriol are signs of an ailing system. Several years ago, columnist and author E.J. Dionne Jr. noted that 'a nation that hates politics will not long thrive as a democracy.' We could not agree more."

The study's authors back their assessment with survey data, but I'm sure we all have anecdotal support for their claims. Whatever the heart of our democracy is, many of us have come to believe that it is broken, and it almost feels as though our efforts are mortally threatened – that this grand experiment may fail.

The tone of today's political climate is full of nastiness, name-calling, and negativity, and something's gotta give. And yet, it seems that we cannot simply call upon our elected officials and political candidates to look each other in the eye and acknowledge one another's personhood. We the people must lead by example.

We must lead by example because what is at stake is more than just an election and its results. What is at stake is our collective moral spirit, as citizens of our community, our country, and the world - it is our ability to see one another with courage and trust, rather than fear.

The democratic process brings us directly into an encounter with the values we hold most deeply as people of faith. It asks hard questions that each of us must examine honestly and fully:

Do we truly believe that every single person, without exception, is deeply worthy and deserving of basic respect, and are we treating them as such?

Do we truly believe that difference is enriching rather than threatening, and do we have the commitment necessary to stay at the table amid the tensions that difference creates?

Do we have the courage and wherewithal to trust our fellow citizens in the unfolding of our shared community – working in faithful partnership even when we disagree profoundly?

If these questions do not give you deep pause, think about them again – for they are deadly serious and truly difficult. Will you stay at the table, nose to nose, even with those whose vision conflicts entirely with your own? And could you even find a certain laughing joy at the honest human encounter that happens there?

The democratic task joins with the calling of our faith – to partner with disparate people of every opinion and stripe in building a common life with as much mutual

flourishing as possible.

But democracy tests our faith that difference will always result in beauty. For what are our nastiest of politicians but people of deep difference and widely diverging world-views?

Democracy tests our commitment to acknowledging the worth of other. For have we not all fallen prey to thinking of political opponents as somehow less than, and entirely 'other'?

Wherever we fall on the political spectrum, engaging with democracy in a way that lives up to our faith requires moral humility and engagement with the tension within us as well as the tension between us.

Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt studies morality, particularly in the context of political belief and he has observed that political liberals and conservatives come from radically different moral starting points. Liberals put their highest value on care and fairness, while conservatives tend to value care and fairness but *also* value group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity as further pillars of moral value.

These differences can be generalized to state that liberals want change and justice, even at the risk of chaos, while conservatives want order and tradition, even at the cost of those on the bottom.

What Haidt concludes is that each group brings a necessary balance to the other – much as they might frustrate one another. Liberalism and Conservatism, he observes, tend to balance the impulse to change and the impulse to stabilize in a way that generally yields positive, albeit moderate results.

Removing one or the other worldview creates a lack of moral diversity that actually makes it harder to understand the world. In fact, he observes that surrounding ourselves with like-minded individuals shuts down open-minded thinking.

Quoting 8th Century Zen thinker Sent-ts'an "If you want the the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between "for" and "against" is the mind's worst disease."

Of course, we must practice to escape the dualism of for and against. As Haidt writes, "Our Righteous Minds were designed by evolution to unite us into teams, to divide us against other teams, and to blind us to the truth." We were made to think in either/or, and to think we are right at all costs.

But we are capable, every now and then, of escaping that mental trap. With practice we can step out of the moral matrix and see one another's point of view with imagination and empathy.

It is then that we engage most truly with one another - from a place of moral humility that respects the balance created by opposing worldviews. It is then that democracy truly lives to its fullest potential in our hearts.

As Parker Palmer points out, “the heart’s alchemy can turn suffering into community, conflict into the energy of creativity, and tension into an opening toward the common good.”

And he argues that there are five habits of heart which prepare us to be engaged citizens, doing our part to keep the democratic experiment alive and in doing so to build full-bodied, diverse communities that truly provide liberty and justice for all. These habits of heart are:

an understanding that we are all in this together,

an appreciation of the value of ‘otherness,’

cultivation of the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways,

a sense of personal voice and agency,

and a stronger capacity to build community.

In other words:

Return to the venues of common life. Find yourself in community with people who think differently than you, and encounter them humbly.

Stay at the table with one another. Hang in there with the tension and keep talking until something new can emerge from the discovery of shared humanity and interconnection.

Tell stories, which invite us out of the either/or issue silos into the shared space of human experience – and which help us understand one another.

The Sufi poet Hafiz writes the following “Out / of a great need / we are all holding hands / and climbing / not loving is a letting go / listen, / the terrain around here / is / far too / dangerous / for / that”

For me, this poem puts a stunning visual image to exactly what we are calling for. Imagine yourself clinging to the side of a mountain, held on the rock only by the rope that ties you to the person you would imagine your enemy. The health of our democracy lies in the rope that holds that tension, stretched taut between opposing views. And we must recognize that tension as a precious gift, the only thing that is holding us in the air. If the rope goes slack, it will mean we have fallen.

We will only survive – our democratic experiment will only survive – if we understand the extent to which our fates are tied together, all of us, no matter what we believe or how we vote. This is neither overly simplistic nor excessively dramatic. It just is. Out of a great need, we are all holding hands and climbing.

Through democracy we are called to live beyond our inborn fear of ‘the other’ into an ongoing dialogue with ‘the other.’

We believe such transcendence is possible. Fostering the empathy and moral humility to stay with that dialogue is difficult, but we believe in the miracle of the human spirit, and it is exactly through the dialogue that we are transformed – our vistas made larger, our understanding made deeper.

The democratic process brings us directly into an encounter with the values we hold most deeply as people of faith. Let us meet those values and live them.

For though we may struggle against it at every step, though it is uncomfortable in the extreme, the tension and creativity inherent in the democratic process helps us grow. It brings us more fully into the knowledge of our interdependence, and that knowledge is what will save us all.

In truly diverse community, we are contradictory and conflicted and entirely connected, and it is from that fact that something new can emerge. Who knows, if we put our noses together we may even find joy and laughter in the process.

In the mean time, we are holding hands and climbing.

Don't let go.

Be angry. Be loving. But stay at the table.

Be gentle. Be righteous. But don't let go.

The terrain around here is far too important for that, and we are climbing for our lives.