

Love

Mark 12:28-34

November 4, 2012

Tuesday is election day. Did you know that? There are only two days left until the end of this seemingly endless presidential campaign. But you do know when the next campaign will begin, don't you? On Wednesday! If not already!

It has been a bitter and contentious and often mean-spirited campaign, two candidates reflecting a deeply divided nation, offering two distinct visions for the direction our country should take and the role of government in taking it there. It is the differences between these two visions that the two campaigns hype and overhype, even while the substance of the visions themselves, on both sides, remains rather ill defined. Whether or not either candidate can make a case for why you should vote for them, they make sure you are told why you should never ever vote for their opponent!

But last week, as this polarizing and acrimonious campaign accelerated toward its climax, something happened. A storm happened. An historically huge and violent storm slammed into the eastern seaboard of our nation, leaving nearly a hundred people dead, millions without power, and severe and costly damage to homes and businesses and infrastructure and lives. And, for a moment, for a couple of days, the storm quieted the noise. Mitt Romney and Barack Obama both cancelled campaign events, both because the weather made them unfeasible anyway, but also out of respect for those who suffered the storm's devastating effects.

And, quite unexpectedly, we saw two political adversaries, Barack Obama and Chris Christie -- one the Democratic presidential nominee and the other the Republican governor of New Jersey, a staunch supporter of the Romney candidacy and the keynote speaker at the Republican National Convention -- we saw these two political adversaries side by side, surveying together the stricken New Jersey coastline and praising each other's efforts to respond quickly and effectively in addressing the needs of the people affected by the storm. Here were two adversaries thrown together by circumstance and bonded together, at least for a moment, by something bigger, something more important, than their political differences.

The cynics, of course, saw it as a ploy to score political points, by one or the other or both of them, and maybe it's true, because it seems, for a politician, everything is political. But I would like to think, too, that in the end, politicians are human beings, too, capable of genuine compassion in the face of human suffering.

Before we are Democrats or Republicans, we are Americans, sensitive to the suffering of our fellow Americans, whoever they may be. And before we are Americans, we are human beings, humans beings capable of empathy, human beings capable of love, genuinely affected by the suffering of other human beings in own nation, yes, but also in Haiti, and in all the places people suffer, and in all the circumstances by which people suffer.

I would like to think that politicians -- and we -- can be brought together, bonded together, by something bigger, something more important, than our differences.

Jesus had adversaries, religious and political adversaries, priests and Pharisees and teachers of the Law. At the end of last week's gospel lesson, we left Jesus leaving Jericho on the road to Jerusalem, with joyful Bartimaeus following with the rest of Jesus' disciples. Between then and the conversation between Jesus and a teacher of the Law related in this Sunday's gospel lesson, here's what happened, according to the gospel of Mark ...

Jesus reached Jerusalem and entered the city, riding on a colt, accompanied by the shouts and praises of an adoring crowd.

Shortly after his arrival, Jesus went into the Jerusalem Temple, driving out the merchants and bankers, scolding the people for making God's house a place for economic exploitation, and so angering his adversaries, the priests and the teachers of the Law, that they began to look for a way to kill him!

A few days later, the priests and teachers of the Law confronted him in the Temple, sternly challenging him: "What gives you the right? What gives you the right to do these things?"

And later a group of Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus, posing him questions, trying to trap him, to trip him up, to embarrass him, with questions about sensitive political and religious issues, about Roman taxation and the resurrection of the dead.

They were doing their best to discredit Jesus, to subvert his influence among the people, but Jesus attacked them too.

He told a parable, a story about tenants who were left to tend a vineyard, but who abused or killed all of the owner's emissaries, refusing to give him his share, instead seizing the property for their own use. The leaders who heard the story, priests and teachers of the Law and Pharisees, figured out, correctly, that the story was about them, and they wanted to arrest Jesus on the spot!

And, on another occasion, related in the gospel of Matthew, though not in Mark, Jesus ranted against the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites, blind guides, whitewashed tombs -- prettied up on the outside but empty and lifeless on the inside, snakes, murderers.

This was how it was between Jesus and the teachers of the Law. They were bitter adversaries. But this time, when a teacher of the Law came to Jesus with another question, things were different.

This time, the story had a different beginning. This teacher of the Law posed a question to Jesus, not to trap him, not to trip him up, not to embarrass him, but because he really wanted to know Jesus' answer, because he heard Jesus give such a good answer to the Sadducees.

This time, Jesus' answer was different. So often, Jesus seems to answer a question with another question, and when this same story is told in the gospel of Luke, that's exactly what Jesus does. But this time, to this teacher of the Law, Jesus gave an answer, clear and direct:

The most important [commandment] is this: "Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second most important commandment is this: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." There is no other commandment more important than these two.

And this time, the story had a different ending. Instead of accusing or criticizing each other, the teacher of the Law and Jesus praised each other. The teacher of the Law said to Jesus: "Well done, Teacher! What you say is true!" And Jesus said to the teacher of the Law: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God!" You are not far from the kingdom of God. What a wonderful thing to say! What a wonderful thing to hear!

This time, things were different. Why?

Things were different this time because Jesus and the teacher of the Law were brought together, bonded together, by something bigger, something more important, than their differences. They were brought together, bonded together by love. They were brought together, bonded together by their shared understanding as students of God's word, as sincere believers, as children of God, as human beings, that love comes first.

Love comes first! Loving God is bigger, more important, than anything else! Anything else! And loving your neighbor is bigger, more important, than any other law, any other duty.

It is more important the teacher of the law said, to obey these two commandments than to make offerings of any kind to God in the Temple. Love is bigger, more important, than any other law, any other religious duty. As Paul wrote to the people of the church in Corinth, without love, all these other things -- faith and service and witness -- all these other things, everything, is empty and meaningless and useless. Do you hear? Faith and service and witness, all that we do in the name of God, all that we stand for, all that we believe, means nothing ... without love.

And love comes from God. Love is one of the fruits of the work of God's Spirit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. But love comes first, because love belongs first.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. What part of your heart and your mind and your strength can be set aside for other purposes, put in the service of other loves? None! Any love of God that is less than total, any love of God that involves anything less than all of you, is no love at all.

And love your neighbor as you love yourself. What is love? A warm feeling? Pity? Sympathy? Love is a virtue, a virtue that places value, the highest of values, on someone outside yourself, a virtue that compels you to desire his well-being, to desire her blessing, to desire their shalom as an end in itself, entirely independent of the state of your own well-being or blessing or shalom, a virtue that compels you to do whatever is in your power to do, regardless of the cost, to ensure their well-being, their blessing, their shalom.

This is love, and this love comes from God, because God is love. It is love out of which the universe was born, and it is love for which the universe is intended. God's plan, scripture tells us, is to bring all creation together in Christ. All creation! How? By love.

Jews and Gentiles are brought together, by love. Men and women are brought together, by love. Rich people and poor people, free people and oppressed people, are brought together, by love. Jesus and a teacher of the Law were brought together, by love. We are brought together, by love. All of creation will be brought together in Christ, by love.

Tuesday is election day and I will vote. I will vote my conscience. I will vote my faith. But my vote, whatever the outcome, will not change the world. No vision or plan or program offered by the Democratic party can change the world and save humanity. No vision or plan or program offered by the Republican party can change the world and save humanity.

It is love that will change the world. Love that comes from God, love that is embodied in Jesus, love that God's Spirit plants in our hearts. Love that brings us together, love that bonds us together, because it is bigger, because it is more important, than anything that divides us.