

The Divine Comedy:

Notes from Pastor Darryl

November 2018

With the midterm elections around the corner, I thought I would share with you an article that I “ghost-wrote” with my good friend and colleague from Bryan/College Station, TX, Rev. Dr. Dan Deleon.

He has a column in the local newspaper in Bryan/College Station. And he asked my help in writing it. We thought we needed to get out ahead of the tribalism that dominates our political rhetoric, as well as remind ourselves that Jesus has a different way of seeing people.

I encourage you all to vote come the first Tuesday of November. But I also offer this article to you all to remind you that we have a higher calling than what our political affiliations and preferences may be.

Peace. Love. Understanding.

Pastor Darryl

“Religious Texts Agree: Be Neighbors, Not Enemies”

By Rev. Dr. Daniel Deleon (Senior Minister of Friends Congregational Church UCC)

It's another election season. Signs supporting this or that candidate have popped up everywhere. Democracy in action can be a beautiful sight ... until it's not.

A couple of weeks ago, all of the signs for one particular candidate vanished from yards in my neighborhood. One day there were several of them; the next there were none. This was unsettling to see, but then things got ugly.

Posting on a private online social network for our neighborhood, a resident decried the signs being stolen, including from her own lawn. Once this case of the missing yard signs was labeled theft, other residents responded to the post with resentment over the insinuation that supporting a different candidate made them complicit to thievery. The back-and-forth so often seen on Facebook and Twitter ensued, with post after post slamming one another's politics and candidate of choice. Concern about theft in our neighborhood devolved into combative comments about politics between people who literally live next door to one another.

Suddenly, neighbors looked at each other with suspicion. "Could that person walking their dog be the one who ridiculed me online?" Chances are that whoever stole those signs doesn't even live in our neighborhood. Who knows? Regardless, a few snatched signs turned neighbors into enemies.

The more I thought about this, the more deeply it troubled me. Hope is hard to find when neighborliness evaporates, because every one of us is called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Being neighbors to one another, no matter who we are or where we come from, is at the heart of the Gospel message. When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the Parable of the Good Samaritan and emphasizes its moral, that the Samaritan who helped the man beaten and left for dead on the Jericho Road was more of a neighbor than those who turned a blind eye to him. "Go and do likewise," Jesus instructs.

Intentional neighborliness is a common thread connecting every major religion. "Love your neighbor" is the Golden Rule that the Talmud -- the primary source of Jewish religious law and theology -- defines as a great principle of Judaism. We Christians must appreciate that when Jesus says to love your neighbor as yourself, he's quoting Torah (Leviticus 19:18). This is a mandate for our Muslim neighbors, as well. The Hadith, a collection of the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, instructs, "People are all God's family, so the dearest people to Him are those who benefit His family the most."

We are required to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, but we can't love what we don't know. To the contrary, we tend to fear it.

Every now and then Islamophobia, the fear of Muslims, rears its ugly head in our country. Whenever that happens, the Islamic Center of San Diego puts up a sign that reads, "Neighbors welcome! Please stop in and say hi." Locally, our friends at the Islamic Community of B-CS do this through open houses at their mosque. People might enter those spaces with timidity, but they leave with less fear and more understanding.

I know of a local couple who recently started hosting "Front Yard Fridays." Once a month they invite the neighborhood to their front yard for a BYOB gathering to hang out and get to know each other. They say it's been "easy to do and extremely enjoyable;" surely, more enjoyable than ripping each other apart online.

But back to my neighborhood, where Stacy, the person I'm humbled to call my spouse, recently rekindled my hope. The street in front of our home is a 30 mph zone connecting two major roads. Traffic often cuts through our neighborhood exceeding the speed limit. In an effort to fix this, Stacy contacted the city, which provided her with a proposal for slowing that traffic down. She then went door-to-door explaining the proposal to our neighbors, asking them to sign a petition either agreeing or disagreeing with it, or acquiescing with the majority. I joined her on this venture, standing in the background swatting mosquitoes, while she spoke with our neighbors.

Knocking on doors, we met a couple who'd lived in their home for 41 years, about 100 yards down the street from us. They were pleased that someone was addressing the speedy traffic problem. "We're just sorry it took us 13 years to meet you," Stacy said.

We also met a couple with a yard sign supporting a candidate we oppose. They agreed that the speedy traffic was dangerous but disagreed with the city's proposal. Talking in person, we were able to explain the process to them and reach a mutual understanding for how the proposal might be adjusted to meet our needs. Good conversations. Good people. Time well spent.

The existentialist psychologist Rollo May writes, "Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing." I'm hoping to spend more time pursuing this in the coming days, when political propaganda will turn up the heat in its attempts at making neighbors who've never met into enemies who think they know all they'll ever need to know about each other.