

- They're ignorant.
- They're weak.
- They're cold and unfeeling.
- They're fiscally irresponsible.
- They're gun nuts.
- They're tree huggers.
- They're not religious (or not religious enough, or not religious in the right way).

And using that shorthand assessment of one's political viewpoint, we conveniently move them to the category of either friend or foe.

Divisiveness is not new to American politics.

Speaking to a passionately divided nation, in his first inaugural address Abraham Lincoln said, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."²

What's happened this year? Peter Stearns, a historian at George Mason University said, "The two sides have come to view each other not as opponents, but as deeply evil. And that's happening when trust in institutions has collapsed and each group is choosing not to live near each other. It seems there's no middle ground."³

But Syracuse University political scientist Michal Barkun offers this encouragement. He said, "This idea that the other side winning the election will produce a precipitous decline and the disintegration of institutions is completely at variance with American history."⁴

The apostle Paul would assert that because we are Christians we are called to find and nurture a middle ground: "Live in harmony with one another," he wrote in Romans 12:16. "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly." Finding middle ground requires humility in order to appreciate that people you differ with are viewing the world with values that differ from yours.

This week local attorney Eric Foster wrote in a *Cleveland Plain Dealer* column that differences between people often are the result of moral choices they make and not because one person or group has morals and the other does not. He gave the example that one person's sense of morality may be shaped primarily by, say, opposition to abortion while another person's moral compass is set by opposition to racism. He pointed out that one can't say that he is making a moral decision while the other is not. Our choices do not indicate whether or not we are moral people.

Foster states,

...if we can acknowledge that those who disagree with us are also guided by morals, we can grant each other more grace when we disagree, because we can recognize we are not simply disagreeing out of petty self-interest or because we have bad intentions.... We are disagreeing because our good intentions have led us to different conclusions.⁵

In the familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount, "Jesus makes love of God and neighbor the fundamental command on which all else depends and makes the command to love

² <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/resources/president-lincoln%C3%A2%E2%82%AC%E2%84%A2s-first-inaugural-address-1861> accessed 11/4/2020

³ Marc Fisher, "To partisans, the future looks dark if the other side wins." *Washington Post*, published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Sat., October 31, 2020, p. A14

⁴ Marc Fisher, "To partisans, the future looks dark if the other side wins." *Washington Post*, published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Sat., October 31, 2020, p. A14

⁵ Eric Foster, "Moral choices and voting," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Wednesday, November 4, 2020, p. C6.

enemies specific and concrete...,” not merely a theory or a nice thing to say. You see, “in Jesus’ situation ‘love of enemies’ referred particularly to the occupying Roman forces, and thus to national enemies as well as to competing religious groups and personal enemies.”⁶ When Jesus said, “Love your enemies” he was referring not just to ideologies or other religions or political parties but to people you encounter in daily life... even in your own family... even in your church.

How can we possibly “love our enemies” and “live peaceably with all”? Does it depend on having a winning personality? On intelligence? On persuasiveness? No. Learning to “live peaceably with all” is not our personal achievement.

We can strive to “live peaceably with all” because of Jesus Christ. In him God graciously blesses us with the ability to love. To love even when we disagree. To love even when a behavior or habit annoys or offends us. To love even when someone has done us wrong. Our ability to love is not a sign of the strength or purity of our personal character. Our ability to love is a sign that we welcome God’s Holy Spirit working in and through us. The Holy Spirit aligns us more and more closely with the spirit and manner of Jesus.

When we “love one another with mutual affection” we allow God in Jesus Christ to shape how we view the world we live in. We allow Jesus to shape the things we choose to do and the things we choose not to do, what we say and what we refrain from saying. Jesus works through us to enable us (as Paul wrote) to “love one another with mutual affection,” to “rejoice with those who rejoice” and “weep with those who weep.” With Jesus shaping our hearts we are able to see “what is noble in the sight of all,” and learn to work with others because of differences we hold rather than in spite of our differences.

It's not our nature. It doesn't come easy. We won't be without our flaws. But it's our calling as followers of the One who loved everyone, including those who opposed him.

Our own nation's political history illustrates that working together for “what is noble in the sight of all” *can* occur. Robert Shrum is a veteran political consultant and professor of politics at the University of Southern California.

Shrum has witnessed many of the highs and lows of campaign rhetoric during dozens of election cycles in American politics. He has steered campaigns for U.S. Democratic presidential candidates, congressional representatives, governors and mayors for the last 40 years.

He worked with Ted Kennedy in the 1980s when there were clearly strong philosophical and political differences between Republicans and Democrats. But he points out that there was a different tone then.

“Amid their differences, President [Ronald] Reagan and Kennedy worked together on immigration reform. Reagan and [Democratic house speaker] Tip O'Neill compromised on Social Security. Reagan would go out and have a drink with Tip O'Neill, and he could raise funds for the Kennedy Library,” Shrum says.⁷

Such collaboration and compromise and coming together to address common goals can happen for us as we welcome Jesus shaping our hearts in order to see “what is noble in the sight of all.”

What can happen when people come together to address a common issue? Here's an example that's happening again this very weekend in Ohio as nearby as in the cities of Lorain and Lakewood. This week the *Plain Dealer* reported on the inspiration that came to a

⁶ New Interpreter's Bible, vol. VIII Matthew-Mark. p. 195

⁷ <https://news.usc.edu/trojan-family/how-did-american-politics-lose-its-civility-usc-experts-weigh-in/> accessed 11/3/2020

Clevelander named Holly Jackson. Two years ago Ms. Jackson got the idea of creating what she calls “Walls of Love.” In various locations, fences and walls are loaded up with bags containing daily necessities and winter gear for families in need – free for the taking. Recently her organization erected its 500th Wall of Love on a chain link fence in Cleveland. Walls have appeared in Michigan, Virginia, Maryland, Colorado, Arkansas, Alaska, with plans to take the project to Texas, Florida and New York in the next few weeks. In just under two years over 585 Walls of Love have helped more than 110,000 individuals.⁸

People may disagree on why families are struggling to meet basic needs or what can be done to address homelessness. But they can agree to “do what’s noble in the sight of all” to alleviate hardship for individuals and families struggling to obtain what they need for daily life.

Here’s another example of what can be done to bridge the divide that separates people, allowing God’s love to work through us so we can “live in harmony with one another.” This comes from a Presbyterian elder in central Virginia. He has an idea for how to begin rebuilding connections, and he thinks that we in the church are perfectly suited to carry it out.

In the most recent issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, elder Charles Lee Holmes wrote,

I call us to do one of the smallest things a human being can do to another human being that carries the greatest positive impact on us and them.” [Are you ready for it?] Wave. Just wave.

Wave at people you see. Wave at people you know and people you don’t know. I suggest you begin in your church [if you’re in a church these days].... Just wave while you’re masked and socially distant. I promise the simple act of just waving will facilitate almost any desired change. Just wave; its meaning is universal – I see you and I acknowledge your humanity. Just wave because it feels good to do it. And that good feeling is not dependent on your wave being reciprocated. And it feels twice as good when the recipient of your wave waves back.

[Holmes ends with this affirmation.] Fear not. Just wave and watch things begin to happen. I promise.⁹

We can do more, of course. We can hardly do less. We must do something. We must refrain from demonizing others simply because their values differ from the one we hold. We can practice with our church family for how to live respectfully and collaboratively with those outside the church family.

In humility let’s bow our lives before the power and wisdom and love and mercy of God. Let’s pray to allow God’s merciful, forgiving, unifying, and hope-giving love to fill us and overflow through our words and deeds.

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⁸ “Walls of Love to erect 50 walls across the country on Nov. 7,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Friday, October 30, 2020, p. A5

⁹ Charles Lee Holmes, “Expectation, Experience and Solutions.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Vol. 202, No. 15, Oct. 26, 2020, p.