

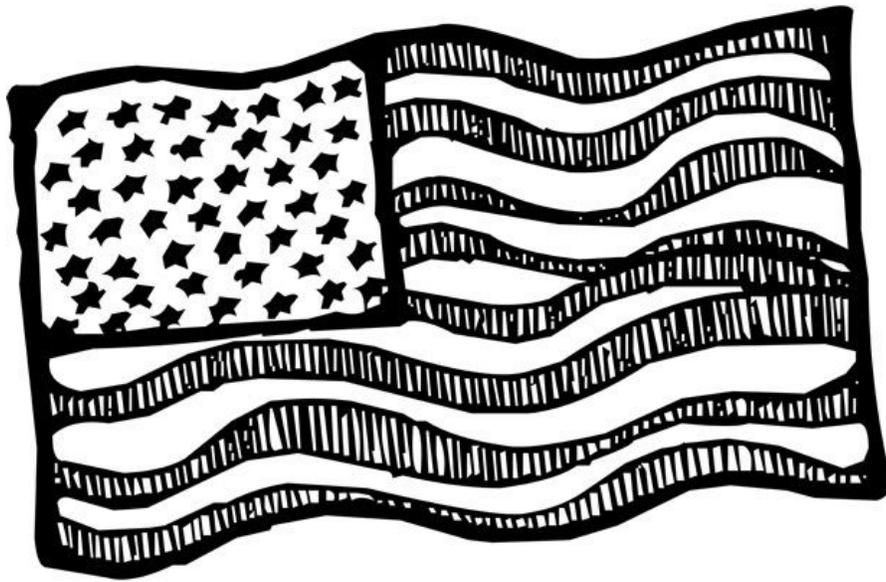


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Loving My Neighbor in Civics and Politics

-Rev. Kit Billings



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“In heaven, the joining of what is good and what is true is called ‘the heavenly marriage’ because everyone there participates in this marriage. That is why heaven is compared to a marriage in the Word and why the Lord is called the Bridegroom and the Husband, while heaven is called the bride and the wife, as is the church. The reason heaven and the church are so called is that the people there are receptive to the divine goodness that is present within truths. All the intelligence and wisdom that angels have comes from that marriage. None comes from anything good separated from what is true or from anything true separated from what is good. The same goes for [the intelligence and wisdom of] people in the church.”¹

-Emanuel Swedenborg, *New Jerusalem* §13, 14

Ever since I can remember I have heard both laypeople and the clergy of all denominations say that it is never good to mix religion and politics. The essence of this viewpoint as I’ve heard it is because so many of us believe that political issues and serious civic-oriented disagreements when talked about openly during church time or programming will lead to only one thing: bad blood, antagonism and pulling away from the heart of what is good and true in life, namely God.

The result of this attitude and philosophy in our country is that by and large we have allowed our political system and therefore our politicians as a whole to have the primary role of telling us what “good politics” are and how we should go about managing political discussion, public matters, and how to deal with each other when disagreement and conflict exists. For nearly all of my professional life as an ordained Christian leader I have bought into this philosophy and by doing so I (like the vast majority of Christians in my experience) I have given up my responsibility to be a leader within civic and political discussion in America. The problem with this approach, when we choose to divorce our religious wisdom from our politics in America, is that we make it okay to elect politicians who toss civility, mutual respect and caring for our “enemies” out the window. Thus, we have accidentally allowed our politicians to lead us down our current approach to politics in America, which is dominated by heavy-duty partisanship, demonizing the other side of the aisle, and sowing tremendous

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *New Jerusalem*. Translated by George F. Dole. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000.

discord, anger and hatred into our culture. This pathway has led us nationally into governmental gridlock, much more unhappiness in general and a breeding ground for allowing evil and hellish energies to flourish. The unfortunate result of all of this is that we make it much harder to understand what is actually good, true and wise concerning the common good in America and our world.

I now believe that the opposite is true about that old, traditional view regarding religion and politics, which is that churches like ours need to be leaders concerning the importance of making sure that religion and politics are not separated but are encouraged to be connected. So, does this mean that I believe that churches and clergy should be telling our parishioners what to think politically and who to vote for on election days? No. Never. That is not at all what I am advocating. What I am advocating with you and for all people in our country who value good democracy is that by far it is much better and wiser for us to consciously and prayerfully to do what our Lord has taught us to do in His Holy Word—that no matter whether I'm dealing with life at home, at work or regarding our political discourse and decision-making, we need to focus ourselves in loving and caring for each other when in agreement or during disagreement. We need to be “loving our enemies” by sowing caring and compassion into our most heated and difficult political moments in life; and we need to insist that civilized and mutually respectful ways of doing politics in America are not compromised. Why? Because when we choose to allow anger, hatred, vitriol and brutal attitudes toward each other to flourish, we make it very hard for us as human beings to see, understand and perceive what is good and true. Thus, when heavy-duty partisanship is allowed to rule, we invite hellish energies and thoughts to creep into our political discourse, and much less common good will happen as the result of anger and bitterness ruling in our government.

As the Rev. Rich Tafel has learned in his ministry of our Washington D.C. Swedenborgian Church of the Holy City, it is vital that we regain our ability to hear and understand those we disagree with in any situation. Doing so leads us into a way of life that is peaceful and good. We need to be able to disagree with each other openly, honoring each other as mutually and highly valued Americans with equal value as people. The converse of this is also true: when we lose our ability to hear and work with those we disagree with, we inevitably turn to violence, which leads to hurting, killing and

destruction. I agree with Pastor Tafel who stated during his great mini-course offered during our annual (virtual) Swedenborgian Church denominational convention this summer, which he titled, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: How You and Your Church Can Successfully Facilitate Political Dialogue In a Polarized Society*, that it is the church's responsibility to claim political dialogue as a great place to allow the angels of our higher nature to thrive.

In Rich's mini-course he shares that when we allow our political forums, our American Congress and our Presidents and their administrations to function in ways where they and we lose our ability to *hear* and *understand* those we disagree with, there will be dangerous results from this. I agree with Rich that the heartbreaking, painful and sometimes deadly clashing lately between Americans across the board is partly the result of allowing hyper-partisanship to win the day.

As we can see in our Judaeo-Christian Word of God, the only spiritual, heavenly and life-enhancing approach to life in general including politics is to not hate and revile and reject each other, to not bear grudges toward those we disagree with, but rather we need to love and care about our political enemies, to wish them well, to bless those who may curse us if they choose, and to use civility and mutual respect at all times. This involves learning how to hear and understand those who oppose my views and wishes, wanting to grasp why they think the way they do and allow for love and caring to win no matter what.

There are ways of experiencing Heaven on Earth within political debate or discourse, where differing views are allowed and used to help lead us into peace, harmony and happiness that stem from allowing goodness and love to flourish. But, this kind of civilized and respectful approach to dealing with politically challenging issues can seem hard to do at first, and yet the choice to use a pathway of mutually loving respect is always worth it.

One of the best ways to begin to change our current national approach to civic discourse and politics is to first take a sobering look at where things often stand today. As Rev. Tafel points out well in his mini-course, Americans in general have allowed for a hyper-partisanship to flourish. Many

Americans have bought into this attitude because of the negative pleasures it affords. This is accomplished by believing that my political foes are all worthy of demonization, that my side is absolutely right and true, and the other side is not simply what I disagree with but is also “dangerous, dangerous to my family, dangerous to my own survival, dangerous for the country, and in fact...the other side...is evil.” (Rich Tafel mini-course)

Both of our major political parties have developed toward this hyper-partisanship attitude where we can no longer disagree with respect...leading us into an entrenched warfare, where we fight believing that if my side wins the election “and crushes the evil enemy, we will have peace.” But, this has not worked out, has it? Things only continue to get worse.

Rich has learned through experience that the hellish forces in life enjoy it when we see ourselves as always right, superior and self-righteous, rather than opening up to the angelic side of our nature, which holds for always keeping an open mind, remaining humble and willing to listen to others, and caring for goodness and truth for their own sake. We have allowed our nation to become heavily polarized, allowing ourselves to turn on each other even during times of national emergency, such as during our time of pandemic. Extreme polarization makes it harder to learn a wider truth and goodness for all. In reality though what Jesus taught was that we need to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to love our enemies. We need to have the servant’s humble attitude and foster servant leadership. He taught that the greatest must be the least among you, and “blessed are the peacemakers.”² (Mtt. 5:9) Our Lord showed us that we must first be merciful and willing to forgive our trespassers, and always be a seeker of reconciliation. These heavenly rules of life and virtues are reflected in other New Testament teachings, such as when the Apostle Peter wrote, “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.” (1 Peter 3:9) And John teaches us: “We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The

² *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:19-21)

Many churches have developed into hyper-partisanship as well, as this is easy to fall into. In my study of New Church wisdom I find invaluable insight into genuine Christian love, faith and discipleship. Such as that a truly spiritual way of dealing with both religious and political disagreements is to always begin by being centered in God, who is Love-Wisdom itself, and to enjoy differences and disagreement by keeping mutual caring and compassion at our forefront.

In *Heavenly Secrets* §1285.3 we read:

“Doctrine is one when all possess mutual love, or charity. Mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one, for it makes one out of varied things. If all, no matter how many - even ten thousand times ten thousand - are governed by charity or mutual love, they have but one end in view, namely the common good, the Lord’s kingdom, and the Lord Himself. Variations in matters of doctrine and in forms of worship are like the variations that exist with the physical senses and with the inner parts of man’s body, which, as stated, all contribute to the perfection of the whole. Indeed the Lord flows in and works by way of charity though in different ways according to the disposition of each individual. And in so doing He arranges every single person into a proper order, on earth as in heaven. In this way the Lord’s will is done, as He Himself teaches, ‘on earth as it is in heaven’.”³

Our reading in *New Jerusalem* §13-14 reminds us that in order for any person to be open to deeper, genuine truths and understanding in life (as in politics), we first need to start with having a caring and loving attitude. We read that deeper insights do not come “...from anything good separated from what is true or from anything true separated from what is good. The same goes for people in the church.” My ability to perceive and understand higher truth flows into me through loving God and my neighbor as myself, and from the Golden Rule, as Christ said: “as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” (Luke 6:31)

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Elliott. London: Swedenborg Society, 1990.

If we as a congregation may have a desire to be a place that is very open to spiritually centered political discourse, then there are tools we can learn, such as our D.C. church's GROUND RULES:

1. **Listen first**
2. **Be curious—especially when you're feeling upset**
3. **Be humble regarding your own perspective**
4. **Ask questions and never sermonize or preach your own views at length**
5. **Rephrase what others say—demonstrating hearing & understanding**
6. **Keep it brief**
7. **End on time**

In conclusion, I will share with you these good words from Professor James Calvin Davis from Columbia Theological Seminary:

“Christian communities who celebrate humility, patience, integrity, and respect as fruits of the Spirit stand in all this distrust and demonization with a witness to a better way. The values of Christian character are also the antidote to our political disease. Standing in the light of God’s reconciling grace, we commend that grace to the world around us, providing a template for more gracious relations with even our most ardent ideological opponent. To model the virtues of civility, and to insist on them from those who claim to represent us, is to discharge our Christian responsibility to break down the walls of hostility and reconcile the world. And that ministry of reconciliation is precisely what the American political community needs from us now. Aggressively demanding civility—from ourselves, our neighbors, our leaders, and the media—is simultaneously a profound exercise of citizenship and a prophetic act of Christian faithfulness.”⁴

May we choose to be part of the Lord’s balm of spiritual, emotional and political healing in our country that is hurting for deeper love in action, whether we agree or disagree. Amen.

⁴ Davis, J. (2012). *Resisting Politics as Usual: Civility as Christian Witness*. Retrieved from <https://www.ctsnet.edu/at-this-point/resisting-politics-usual-civility-christian-witness>

Readings from the Word:

LevitiuS 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Luke 6:27-36

[Jesus said,] “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.[a] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”⁵

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