RESTORING CIVILITY

Being a Civil Voice in Uncivil Times

"Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ... As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." [1 Corinthians 12: 14-26]

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of your redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven you. [Ephesians 4: 29-32]

While public discussion of political issues has the potential to bring out the best in us – by surfacing creative new ideas or developing effective problem-solving strategies – more often than not in our public dialogue about the issues of the day the opposite seems to be happening. From the national dialogue about health care to the passionate discussion of immigration reform this year, it is all too easy for anger and frustration to get the best of us. Whether around the office water cooler or the extended family dinner table, reasoned conversation is taking a back seat to personal attacks and replayed sound bites. Because we avoid these conversations, we miss out on deeper understanding.

As people of faith participating in the public square, we are called to a higher standard of engagement and interaction with our neighbors – even and perhaps especially those with whom we may disagree on an issue. Our faith provides us with spiritual resources to take the conversation to a different level. We can choose respect and hope over animosity and bitterness. We can choose to listen and learn rather than attack and insult. We can choose to have civic discussions in civil tones.

We do not have to avoid the hard issues. We can prepare ourselves for a better conversation by thinking about some of the following ideas to shape our conversation on difficult and emotion-filled issues of the day.

"Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!"
- Isaiah 58:1