

## Community or Chaos?

In the wake of this election, where are we heading as a nation? The title of this article is from a question asked by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. some 60 years ago. It is a question more relevant and urgent now than ever. Is there hope for a future of “liberty and justice for all” in our nation? Or will we continue on a path of social and political polarization, with an increasing likelihood of widespread civil unrest? Which is it going to be, community or chaos?

As I am writing, I don’t know the outcome of the election. However, this time leading up to Election Day has been characterized by division and hostility stoked by confusion, suspicion, deception, and fear-mongering, and I suspect that little of that will change in the short term, regardless of the outcome of the election.

How did we get to this point? As people, we have different experiences, different cultural traditions and values, different wants and needs, thus different ideas about what is right and best for ourselves and society. Sometimes those differences can be strong enough to feel threatening, and when people feel threatened they become defensive and angry. If those differences are perceived to threaten core beliefs or values, that anger can become hatred and turn neighbors with whom we disagree into enemies who, rather than being listened to or negotiated with, must be defeated or even destroyed. This is an environment in which democracy cannot long survive. This is where we find ourselves.

How are people of faith to understand and respond to our situation? Can faith provide a grounding, a foundation upon which to build a way of life which can guide and serve us through the confusion, chaos, and enmity which confronts us? It seems clear that faith must provide an alternative to the never-ending cycle of polarization, suspicion, fear, and hatred which has brought us to this point.

That alternative, as sages and prophets from many faith traditions have said throughout history, is love. Love is what gives life meaning and purpose above and beyond the mere satisfaction of our individual needs and desires. It’s what brings joy to life even in the midst of all the vagaries of life: pain, disappointment, suffering, loss, and death. These things are inevitable and unavoidable. Yet love is what makes it all not only bearable, but worthwhile, and the greatest love is that in which suffering is shared, when we bear each other’s burdens, so that together we can also joyfully share and celebrate the goodness and beauty that is all around us, whatever our differences may be. This vision, which Dr. King called the Beloved Community, is what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. We all live in hope of a life of peace, freedom, and community, but this can only be achieved if we love and respect each other. Are we up to that challenge, do we have that capacity? Experience shows that human love is fickle, enmeshed with our self-centered egos, which tend to skew our ideas of what is right and best in favor of our own wants and needs. If we fear someone’s differences from us are a threat to our “way of life”, then our commitments to love and respect each other soon go out the window.

Is there hope for a way out of our human dilemma? We need divine help to overcome our human proclivity to create enemies out of those with whom we differ. The Christian scriptures attest that God **is** Love and that Love also the **goal** of life as well as that which **empowers us** to attain that goal. I believe this is what Jesus was and is all about. Jesus lived, taught, and embodied the divine Love which created us, and offers that same Love as a way of life which can see us through anything which comes our way—even death. Jesus himself was executed by those who were scandalized and felt threatened by him and his message, yet the life of Love which he embodied was not defeated by his death, but rather overcame the power of death and lives on. This divine Love is all-inclusive, with no exceptions, encompassing even enemies. Inspired by that Love which he has not only revealed but made available to us by his living Spirit, we, too--confident that “neither life, nor death, nor anything in all of creation can separate us from the love of God”--can live free from fear, free to love our neighbors and even our

enemies as Jesus did when he prayed from the cross “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Thus, regardless of the outcome of and fallout from the election, for people who trust in this Jesus way of Love there will, as always, be ample opportunity to live out and share that Love in both word and deed with those who are hurting or in need, those who despair, those who are afraid, and to stand with those who face recriminations, ostracism, or worse for their beliefs, values, or lifestyles. In this way can those who make up the Beloved Community bring, comfort, healing, and hope in an ever-more chaotic and seemingly hopeless world. That is our hope and our calling.

Nelson Bock has been a Helena resident since 2017, when he moved here from Denver, Colorado after retiring from the religion faculty of Wartburg College, a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He is a member of Our Redeemer’s Lutheran Church in Helena.