

# Being Imperfect Together – 06-18-15

## Disagreement, Respect, and Our Political Differences, Part 2

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Last week we looked at the presence of political differences in our community and how we can make the mistaken assumption that others think the way we do. We also considered that disagreement can contribute to positive outcomes. This week we will examine the practice of respect.

Definitions of respect vary somewhat widely, and for our purposes I want to zoom in on one in particular:

"Respect is a way of treating or thinking about someone. You show respect by being polite and kind." (from Vocabulary.com)

As you can infer, this means we regard the other highly, or think much of them, when we respect them. It brings to mind words and qualities such as esteem, value, and the Greek word *philia*, meaning close friendship or brotherly love. *Philia* is one of the four types of love in the Bible.

Our political beliefs and feelings are very personal, forming as they do from our family of origin, our own life experiences, and even, according to some researchers, from differences in how we're wired neurologically. It's great when we interact with others who share our political ideals, because then we feel validated and part of a group. Feelings like that are especially appealing to the older, deeper part of our brain that loves to connect with like-minded others because we are social creatures.

Respect is also an example of an attitude, which refers to a complex state of beliefs, feelings, values, and dispositions to act in certain ways. When we talk about the practice of respect, we mean how we enact our beliefs and values that "All are welcome here at Sts. Clare & Francis."

Handling the feelings part of the equation can be tricky for people, and usually our behaviors flow most naturally from our feelings. In terms of human development, beliefs and values reflect our higher, more recently evolved brain functions, whereas feelings and behaviors spring from older, deeper parts of ourselves and our "wiring." This means that we are challenged to handle our feelings and behaviors from the higher parts of our brain, the seat of compassion, empathy, beliefs, and values.

So how do we do this? Essentially, this is what we in psychotherapy call self-soothing. It may be the first step to practicing respect.

First comes awareness. Pay attention to how your body reacts in an interaction with someone with whom you differ. You may feel tightness, heat, anxiety, the urge to run or attack, or any number of other symptoms. Use these reactions as a signal to take your time and loosen your muscles, take a breath, or shift your body's position to a more open stance.

Once you are aware of the tendency to react strongly and, perhaps, harshly to political differences, you can slow down and use self-talk to remind yourself that difference is not threatening, and it doesn't have to be your job to try to force the other person to see things your way. Remind yourself that reasonable people can disagree on politics and remain good companions and valued members of your church community. Think of a positive experience you've had with the person, or one you've observed another person have, and hold that thought for 12-15 seconds. That length of time is what brain researchers and authors have determined is optimal for shifting out of a negative mindset and beginning to literally change the brain in a more desirable direction.

Another useful tactic is one I use with couples who are having a hard time with conflict: "Find the understandable part." Maybe you vehemently disagree with someone's choice of a presidential candidate or position on an issue, but challenge yourself to go deeper. The vast majority of people (especially here at Sts. Clare & Francis) actually do care about our city, state, country, the poor, etc., but they differ on how to solve problems. Looking for the understandable part, even something as basic as presuming they care about the issue, allows your emotions to shift to a more peaceful state. Then, nudge yourself into a curious, open state to ponder whether there might be a small area of agreement between the two of you. If there is, great! If there isn't, tell yourself it's no big deal and you'll agree to disagree.

There's much more to write about this topic, but the essential truth remains: Practicing respect means treating others with whom you disagree politically as more than just their views. It means treating them as valuable, worthwhile members of our church family with whom we are journeying towards wholeness and greater wellbeing. I propose that respect is our North Star, guiding us on our course for building community that welcomes the gifts of diverse thinking and worldviews.

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