

“How to fix our democracy”  
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There are some days I am filled with so much hope for this country, this world. And there are other days I am filled with despair.

In the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, we saw the people of this great country rally to stand together with the victims in Texas and Florida. We saw people set aside their differences and lend a helping hand. We saw heroes trudging through muck and water to save the lives of people they had never met. We saw a wave of generosity fight back against the storm, as people gave money they couldn't afford to give.

Hope.

But when Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico 11 days ago, leaving the island in shambles, without power, drinkable water, food, or shelter, its 3.4 million people were mostly on their own. Help has been far slower, donations much smaller, public concern far less unified, and government assistance much diminished. People are still waiting for help that has yet to come.

Why the difference? There are many reasons, of course: difficult logistics, the island's infrastructure and bankrupt economy, and just plain compassion fatigue.

But there is another factor. Nearly half of Americans have no idea that Puerto Ricans are US citizens. A *New York Times* poll found that more than 8 in 10 Americans who know Puerto Ricans are citizens support giving help to Puerto Rico. Of those who don't know, only 4 in 10 support giving aid.

When people were told that Puerto Ricans were US citizens, their willingness to help increased.

This leaves us with a startling observation: we're not helping Puerto Ricans because we don't see them as one of us. We see them as beyond the bounds of our love, our community. They are outsiders.

Paul knows something about this failure to love the other. He pays its price every day. Paul writes his letter to the Philippians from prison. He's been incarcerated because some powerful people have failed to see in him a necessary and vital citizen of their community. They believe him disposable, killable.

Philippi knows something about this failure also. Philippi is where democracy and the Roman Republic died, in the last great battle that inaugurated the Roman Empire. By Paul's time, Philippi is an imperial colony, ruled by martial law and made rich off the backs of slaves working the mines. It is a place of exploitation.

And within this community is a small, fledgling church trying to be so different from the culture all around it. It is being persecuted. And in the face of that suffering, some members of its community are beginning to fail. Paul writes because he has heard word of division within the church, of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition, of Christians who have begun to pursue their own interests of self-preservation over the interests of Christ.

If Paul were alive today, I have no doubt he would pen a similar letter to us. Every day, our culture becomes more divided and hostile, celebrating power and self-interest. We grow indifferent to suffering, oppression, and death, when beyond the boundaries of our own tribe, be it family, race, class, nationality, or political ideology. We isolate ourselves, refusing to commune with people different from ourselves.

Our democracy stands imperiled. There can be no “rule of the people,” when there are no people—only individuals, or tribes, seeking the dominion of their own interests.

The solution lies in an ancient and simple (but, by no means, easy) rule. It is the way of Christ. Paul explains that way by sharing one of the church’s earliest hymns. It sings of how Jesus did not regard his power as something to be exploited but chose instead to humble himself, to serve others, to give up everything, even his life, for them.

It sings of a love that stopped stones being thrown at a woman’s body, of a love that fed the hungry and healed the sick, of a love that saw God in the poor and the oppressed, of a love that bled to see humanity freed.

Only the way of Christ, only a recovery of humility, compassion, and solidarity, will heal the rancor that now dominates our society. We must get better at listening and seeing one another as citizens of God’s community.

Paul’s letter offers a way back to that community, that democracy.

But we can’t do it alone. And so Paul makes three promises.

First, he promises that we possess the mind of Christ. In other words, Christ dwells in us, making us capable of giving up more than we realized. It means that the power of humility and love is already inside each of us.

Secondly, he promises that God will give us energy to activate that power and resist the fatigue of compassion.

Finally, he says, “God is at work in you.” At first, this might simply sound like a reiteration of the second promise. But the Greek tells us more. In the Greek, “you” is plural; it actually says, “God is at work in all of you.” God is working in *us*, not as individuals, but as a community. We are like Antaeus, that ancient giant in Greek mythology, who was invincible as long as he remained in contact with his mother, the earth. To have strength, to have the energy of God, we must stay in contact with the body of Christ, with each other, with the community.

Martin Buber writes, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”

That electricity would make us all friends, all citizens of the same community, all members of the same family, all parts of the same body.

Our democracy will be fixed, just as our church will be, when we begin to value the common good over the personal good, when we choose servant leaders over CEO leaders, when we give up our privilege and seek the welfare of the other, when we actually talk about ideas and morals and seek consensus.

We must hear again the words of Paul, and I dare say, the words of Abraham Lincoln, who 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. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Our democracy depends on these better angels—and on our ability to see those angels in each other, whatever our division. This does not mean we cease with truth-telling, or freedom-seeking, or oppression-turning. It does not mean that we avoid conflict or simply try to be blind to our differences. What it does mean is that I never give up on your value, your citizenship, in this community. It means that I love you. It means I’d give everything, even my life, for you. It means I seek, not power over you, but power with you.

I think of these angels. And I must say, I think of Jane. A woman with the sharpest of wit and honesty. A woman who spoke her mind and had no compunction about disagreeing with you. But always she hugged you. Hugged you with one of those famous Jane hugs, enveloping you in the warmth of her slim, frail body. She hugged you like she loved you. Like she needed you. Like you were the source of her happiness.

And maybe it begins there. Maybe the beginning of fixing our democracy is to be found in a hug. A hug that puts us in contact with our source of strength, like Antaeus with the earth.

So I want you to hug the person next to you. Right now. Hug them like Jane would hug them. Find your better angel. It may just be that this angel, in this moment, goes by the name of Jane.

**Amen.**