

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, **February 7, 2021** --- from 9:00-9:45am
Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

This lesson, which springboards from a recent opinion piece (see "In the News" below), invites us to think peacefully and generously about what it means to live in a society supercharged with partisanship and to contemplate how reducing those with whom we disagree to caricatures compounds the problem. We seek a biblical view in all of this.

How To Participate:

We are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. *The Wired Word* Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in *The Wired Word* virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>
or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592
Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220
Passcode: 195152

For more information about *The Wired Word* go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes/sunday-classes-for-adults.html#WiredWord>

For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the **free** weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Columnist's Caricature of Others Thrown Off Balance by 'Aggressive Niceness'

The Wired Word for the Week of February 21, 2021

In the News

Editor's note: *Our normal practice with the "In the News" section is to tell the news without adding opinion, leaving interpretation of the news for the rest of the lesson. The story we are referencing this week, however, is itself an opinion piece that makes no effort to speak to a broader audience. As such, it is difficult to sum it up without seeming to either take the side of the column writer or take the side of those she sees as having the wrong view and therefore being bad people. Even some readers who side with the columnist may find her conclusions argumentative. Despite these problems, we at The Wired Word feel the column can take us to a fruitful topic, so we ask you, our readers to do two things: First, be sure to read the "Applying the New Story" section that follows the "In the News," and second, don't assume TWW is promoting a political position. We are not.*

Virginia Heffernan, a political columnist at the *Los Angeles Times*, began her February 5 column by saying, "Oh, heck no. The Trumpites next door to our pandemic getaway, who seem as devoted to the ex-president as you can get without being Q fans, just *plowed our driveway without being asked and did a great job.*" She then asked, rhetorically, "How am I going to resist demands for unity in the face of this act of aggressive niceness?"

She went on to posit her theory that this generous act was freely given because both she and her neighbors were white people in an all-white neighborhood. She backed this theory by quoting a line from an old Eddie Murphy *Saturday Night Live* sketch where Murphy declares, "... when white people are alone, they give things to each other. For free."

Heffernan next noted that historically, nice acts have sometimes been performed by unsavory parties, referencing Hezbollah's social outreach programs and French Nazi sympathizers who believed that Nazi soldiers were "polite."

That's a lot of freight to dump on neighbors whose only "sin" -- in Heffernan's eyes -- was to continue to be part of Donald Trump's "base." There was no indication that they had been among the people who stormed the Capitol on January 6, but she made it clear in her column that she was open to *them* making "amends" -- "Not with a snowplow but by recognizing the truth about the Trump administration and, more important, by working for justice for all those whom the administration harmed."

Heffernan cited a comment from Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) following the Capitol attack. The United States, Sasse said, "isn't Hatfields and McCoys, this blood feud forever." And, he added, "You can't hate someone who shovels your driveway."

"So here's my response to my plowed driveway, for now," Heffernan wrote. "Politely, but not profusely, I'll acknowledge the Sessian move. With a wave and a thanks, a minimal start on building back trust. I'm not ready to knock on the door with a covered dish yet."

More on this story can be found at this link:

[Column: What Can You Do About the Trumpites Next Door? *Los Angeles Times*](#)

Applying the News Story

Back in 2002, the late Charles Krauthammer, who self-identified as a conservative, but was often hard to nail down to any one ideology and was widely read by liberals as well, posted a [column in *Townhall*](#) in which he said, "To understand the workings of American politics, you have to understand this fundamental law: Conservatives think liberals are stupid. Liberals think conservatives are evil."

Krauthammer's point was that both groups see the other as caricatures, though he didn't use that term in the column. A caricature is when certain characteristics of a person or a group are exaggerated to a comic or grotesque effect. But the trouble, as Krauthammer suggested, is that both groups treat the other as though the caricature is an accurate portrayal.

He said, for example, that when conservatives says liberals are stupid, they mean this "in the nicest way. Liberals tend to be nice, and they believe -- here is where they go stupid -- that most everybody else is nice too. Deep down, that is. Sure, you've got your multiple felon and your occasional war criminal, but they're undoubtedly depraved 'cause they're deprived. If only we could get social conditions right -- eliminate poverty, teach anger management, restore the ozone, ... -- everyone would be holding hands smiley-faced, rocking back and forth to 'We Shall Overcome.'"

Regarding liberals' view of conservatives, Krauthammer said, "Liberals are not quite as reciprocally charitable. It is natural. They think conservatives are mean. How can conservatives believe in the things they do -- self-reliance, self-discipline, competition, military power -- without being soulless? How to understand the conservative desire to actually abolish welfare, if it is not to punish the poor? The argument that it would increase self-reliance and thus ultimately reduce poverty is dismissed as meanness rationalized -- or as Rep. Major Owens, D-N.Y., put it more colorfully in a [then] recent House debate on welfare reform, 'a cold-blooded grab for another pound of flesh from the demonized welfare mothers.'"

No wonder politics includes so many episodes of "irreconcilable differences"!

In the current political climate, some aspects of these caricatures may have changed or even flipped, with, for example, liberals thinking conservatives are stupid and conservatives thinking liberals are evil, but Krauthammer's primary point that we pigeonhole people who see things differently from us and assign them motivations that may be inaccurate or

overstated remains the same.

We may not be able to do much about the state of the political scene, but Heffernan was talking about her *neighborhood*. And for her, the neighbor plowing snow from her driveway was an incongruity that didn't fit with the caricatures she had formed about "mean" Trumpites, and she was having trouble getting past it.

We at TWW think the Lord wants better from us. And it can start by trying to see our neighbors as whole persons rather than as representatives of a monolithic stupidity or a conspiracy of meanness.

"Avoiding caricature" is a way of saying that we don't characterize someone with whom we disagree as a bad person simply because he or she sees things differently from how we do. And we certainly don't agree that all members of an ideological group are alike.

The Big Questions

1. If you think of yourself as a liberal (or progressive), to what degree do you think the "nice-stupid" characterization fits you? If you think of yourself as a conservative, to what degree do you think the "mean-evil" characterization fits you? Assuming you don't think those caricatures describe you, why do you suppose people of the opposite political position may tend to believe them (or believe whatever new caricatures have arisen in the current name-calling political environment)?
2. Why do you think so many of us accept without questioning the caricatures or stereotypes of those who see things differently from how we do? Are there any useful aspects of caricatures? What problems do they cause?
3. What can you do to avoid caricaturing people who see things differently from how you do? How might avoiding caricaturing others help you be a better neighbor? a better citizen? a better person? a better Christian?
4. Heffernan said that despite the neighbor's kind act, she's "not ready to knock on the door with a covered dish yet." But what do you suppose she might discover about her "Trumpite" neighbor if she did? What might the neighbor discover about her?
5. Does the fact that you hold certain opinions that many other people you like hold necessarily make those opinions synonymous with truth? What role should humility play in political discussions? How can you deal with the human capacity for self-deception?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 25:21-22

If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will reward you. (No context needed.)

This proverb may be a metaphorical way of saying that we should turn enemies into no-longer enemies by acts of kindness that meet their needs. But if we read it literally, it seems to be saying that we should do such things as plow the enemy's driveway to *harm* them (and, get this: earn God's reward). And the literal meaning -- at least the "harm" part of it, or at least something like that -- seems to be what Heffernan had in mind when she referred to her neighbor's plowing of her driveway as "aggressive niceness" -- making her the "target" of the harm.

By the way, the apostle Paul commends this proverb -- presumably in its metaphorical sense -- in Romans 12:20.

Question: Given that you don't know Heffernan's neighbors, from what you can surmise, is there any reason to think their plowing of the snow in her driveway was anything other than a genuine act of neighborliness?

John 1:45-46

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." (For context, read 1:43-51.)

At the start of Jesus' public ministry, Nathanael had his doubts about Jesus' true identity, especially when he heard that he hailed from the town of Nazareth, which Nathanael apparently caricatured as "Hicksville." His friend Philip bore witness about Jesus, however, and simply invited Nathanael to come see for himself. When he did, Nathanael's stereotype of Nazareth residents fled, and he accepted Jesus as the Son of God and King of Israel.

Questions: Nathanael's bias against Nazarenes was initially a barrier to taking Jesus seriously -- indeed, a barrier to even *meeting* Jesus. What barriers, if any, have kept you from getting to know your near-at-hand neighbors? What barriers, if any, have kept you from getting to know your metaphorical neighbors in the community and world? What, if any, friends have helped you get past those barriers, and how did they aid you? How is Philip's invitation a model for conversations you might have with people you've caricatured?

1 Corinthians 13:13 (KJV)

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. (For context, read 13:1-13.)

We are used to hearing this verse as touting "faith, hope, *love*," with the greatest of these being love. But it's worth noting that the old King James Version used "charity" rather than "love" to translate the underlying Greek word *agapē*, possibly because it is cognate with *caritas*, as in the Vulgate. But charity also distinguishes *agapē* from other Greek words that can be brought into English as "love." (These include *erōs*, usually used for romantic or physical love; *storgē*, to denote family affection, like parents' love for their children; and *philia*, related to friendship and cherishing.) But charity works for *agapē* because it does not call for warm feelings or passion, but for action, the good deed, the helping hand.

In fact, when Jesus said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19), the word he used is *agapaō*, the verb form of *agapē*.

Today in America, charity can denote not only good deeds, but also a generous spirit toward those who see things differently from how we do. Thus Paul, in the lead-up to the verse above, wrote "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:4-6).

That sounds to us like charity.

Questions: When has someone been charitable toward you? Why do you think Paul elevated *agapē* over faith and hope? Which comes first: a charitable attitude or a charitable act? If you don't feel charitable, will acting charitable change your feelings? How can you change uncharitable feelings toward people who see things differently, when there is no indication or assurance that they may ever see things your way? Why does seeing things your way seem necessary? Perhaps neither way is God's way.

Philippians 4:2-3

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life" (No context needed.)

Near the end of his letter to the Philippians, Paul refers to a disagreement between two women in the church. He does not say what the disagreement was, but he does mention the women by name and asks them to reconcile. He goes on to ask the church members to assist these women in coming together, and in the same sentence, he compliments both of

them. There is no suggestion in the Bible that the church at Philippi had an ongoing problem with these two women. In all probability, the leaders in the congregation did as Paul urged, and helped these women to find fellowship with one another again.

But consider Paul's methodology: First, he shares no gossip about the conflict. One of the reasons that we don't know what these two women disagreed about is because Paul didn't describe it. Second, Paul doesn't take sides. He does not describe one person as good and another as bad. Instead, he preserves the integrity and reputation of both women. He mentions that they have worked faithfully alongside him in the work of the gospel. That praise for the women, rather than any gossip about their controversy, is what he shares with the congregation.

When we fail to consider that someone with whom we disagree may still have good motives, we don't see the other person as he or she is, but instead treat that person as a caricature, a distorted image.

We should not take from Paul's words here that all controversy with others must be avoided, for when disagreements are expressed with mutual respect, in honesty and good faith, with courtesy and humility that avoids name-calling, it has the potential to improve things (though this is not guaranteed). The spirit can be, "I disagree with your position, but I am not thinking therefore that you are a bad person." This is a view that can be called charity.

Questions: What attitudes and assumptions have helped you not to caricature people with whom you disagree? When you pray for those who disagree with you, what do you ask God for regarding them? Why?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to [this article](#) that tells a story somewhat similar to Heffernan's.
2. In what sense can noting that someone is a politician be a caricature? What, if anything, would you want politicians, (caricatured or otherwise) to take from this lesson?
3. When have you been in a situation where you deliberately did not identify your view on some topic under discussion for fear that others would reject you or assume you were like the caricatures they have of people who think/vote/believe as you do?
4. Comment on this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "Your reference to Krauthammer reminds me of how much I enjoyed George Will's baseball columns. We had a love of baseball in common, and it opened me up to reading his other columns. I read his political columns because they challenged my preconceptions and I didn't feel like I had to confess to being wrong about everything if I agreed with him about something."
5. What do you make of Heffernan's assumption that the neighbor plowed her driveway because they were both white people in a white neighborhood? Did the Eddie Murphy example really fit Heffernan's situation, or was she putting a racist spin on circumstances where the term did not apply? Is this an example of stereotyping on her part? Is there any reason *not* to believe that a black neighbor with a snowplow might have just as generously plowed Heffernan's drive?
6. Think about this, from TWW team member Malia Miller: "I keep thinking about how challenging it has been to fight against this divisiveness because we are bombarded with divisive language and demonization from many politicians -- on every side. I long for the return of civil discourse. It makes it so much easier to show charity to others with whom I may disagree, and I also believe it provides an environment where every voice is welcome, which keeps dissenters from going 'underground' for fear of judgment."

Responding to the News

This is a good time to ask someone with whom you disagree politically or otherwise to explain their views and then really listen without being defensive, argumentative or judgmental.

Also consider, what can you do this week, in a practical way, to assist someone who has a different political viewpoint from you? What can you do to see that person as a whole individual, with characteristics or views that may be unlike the caricature you hold of the group to which you think he or she seems to fit?

Prayer

Let me be generous, kind, and slow to judge, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

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