



# BUCKS COUNTY Courier Times

## **Guest Opinion: The Possibility of Compassion in Politics**

**By The Rev. Kristopher D. Schondelmeyer**

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I've heard many colleagues share how proud they are that they serve "purple" congregations where members from different sides of the political aisle worship together without arguing over politics. But, when I inquire into how they've achieved this sort of utopian congregation, the truth comes out. They don't argue over politics because they simply don't talk about politics. They completely avoid conversations about issues affecting public policies and public life in their ministry, pretending this is the sign of a healthy church. As a faith leader moored in the history of Protestant Reformed theology, I reject the idea that in order for a church to be healthy in the midst of deep political division that we must ignore or avoid conversations about public policies and public life. I believe it is important that we, as people of faith, can show the world what it looks like for a community to engage in civil discourse in love, and how to hold those with whom we disagree in the sacred compassion that holds each one of us.

As social psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Haidt, has discovered in his research on Moral Foundations Theory, liberals and conservatives are less opposites and more of a yin and yang. Like the northern and southern poles of our planet that help our planet to maintain proper balance, we need aspects of each pole to maintain proper balance in our public life. It seems ridiculous to think about, but if the north pole and the south pole became polarized, only attracted to the same kind of magnetic current that it puts out, it would threaten life as we know it. If the poles became polarized, we'd lose the magnetic field that protects our planet, and life as we know it would truly be in danger. So it is in our public life. When we become so polarized that we are fearful of the other side, so polarized that we literally see the other as our enemy, that's when we are in danger in our society. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

As someone rooted in compassion-based spiritual disciplines, I have long believed that there are deeper implications to the power of compassion. When we come to understand that our true nature, our true grounded self, is a compassionate self, created in the image of God, we unlock a power for healing deep pain in our own lives and in the world around us. When we discover that our true self is, at times, at war with other emotional parts within us, we can begin to see that the war within us is at the root of the

wars between us that cause us to see others as our enemies. In the context of political ideology, these wars are the root of the vitriol and partisanship we know all too well. We have to learn to ground ourselves in our true, compassionate self. That's the only way to cultivate compassion for others, especially those with whom we disagree.

As our nation mourns the passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, we can look to her life as an example of the possibility for compassion. Justice Ginsburg and Justice Antonin Scalia were ideological opposites. But they were both grounded and compassionate people. It was from that grounded and compassionate place that they were able to form an intimate friendship that spanned their decades on the Supreme Court. For the health of our nation, we must heed their example. We must learn to see the positive aspects of the conservative pole, and the positive aspects of the more liberal pole. And, for our nation's health, we must be able to oscillate between the poles in public life, resisting the temptation to become polarized. And that can only happen if we're grounded in our true, compassionate self, and willing to talk with one another from the heart.

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