

Discussion Questions

Lesson One: The Challenge of Civility

1. Overall, how do you feel about political compromise in areas that matter to you? At what point (if any) do you find yourself resisting compromise on important issues?
2. Ray argues that, while we need to prioritize remaining one people, it is understandable how our discourse got to this point. Do you find it understandable that our culture engages its current approach to dialogue?
3. How do you react when you witness uncivil discourse of the type Ray describes? What do you do? Say? Think or feel?

Lesson Two: Scripture and Civility

1. Where in the New Testament do you see Jesus or the apostles modeling the kind of approach Ray advocates? Give examples.
2. What is an important aspect of your identity (religion, sexual orientation, gender, race, profession, age, etc.) that brings your voice into the political/civil arena? What is a healthy way to maintain that identity while finding common ground with those who do not share it?
3. Are you concerned that the approach Ray advocates risks being weak-kneed in the face of injustice or oppression? Why or why not?

Lesson Three: What Civility Might Look Like

1. Are you tempted to see people who disagree with you on important political or social issues as bad people?
2. What is an issue (besides abortion or healthcare, both of which Ray discusses in the lecture) that people in our culture tend to treat as all-or-nothing in terms of the results they will accept? Identify points in relation to the issue that the people on both sides of the issue are likely to agree about.
3. Having found common ground between the two groups on each side of the issue you identified in question two, offer two suggestions for where communities might productively build from there without agreeing about every aspect of the issue in question.

Lesson Four: Getting There

1. Do you ever communicate with others that your faith motivates some of the choices you make, as a citizen or in your personal life? Why or why not?
2. How can we communicate our religious motivations to do good in the world without running into the problem of letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3)?
3. Describe someone you know -- not someone famous -- who is a light in the world; who models Christianity in the way that Ray describes. What does that person do well? How might you communicate about that person's works to others? How might you imitate that person's good example?

The Takeaway

Lesson One: The Challenge of Civility

While historically, the level of vitriol we are seeing has precedent in U.S. political discourse, since World War 2, mostly, the dialogue has been reasonably civil. But in the wake of the Cold War's cessation, we have found ourselves increasingly divided as a nation. In the 1990s, a deliberate political decision was made for leaders to use inflammatory rhetoric demonizing opponents and motivating people. Since then, leaders have modeled political discourse that

1. Projects the opponent as an enemy.
2. Suggests that incremental steps toward a long-term goal was not preferable to a long-term war to get everything you want.
3. Suggests that compromise is for losers.
4. Uses the culture to sort people into groups for political gain.
5. Uses language as a cudgel. We are told that the stakes are so high, and the people on the other side so abhorrent, that getting along with opponents was undesirable. We don't have to treat them well because they are such terrible people. The bumpers helping us get along were removed and our divisions exacerbated in the 2000s. Dark money made it possible for people to say anything, even in ads – truth and civility became nonissues. The tone of equilibrium provided by mainline Protestant and Catholic churches was lost as they lost their social primacy, and as pulpits with more extreme views and language gained precedence. So it is both essential to remain one people as we struggle over our differences – and understandable that our discourse has taken this tone.

Lesson Two: Scripture and Civility

Treating other people well is an idea that appears throughout scripture, and it asks us to be civil to one another in civic space. We must act with humility rather than behaving as if we know everything and remember to think about having to live with these people in the long term. For these reasons, we should treat opponents mercifully when we have the opportunity to do so. Episcopalians are skilled in working with those who are different from us because, as a minority denomination in the church, we have never been able to lean on common identity to live out our lives of faith. We have had to rely on shared goals and values, and as the Christianity's influence in the civic arena wanes, we must use those skills. We should work with people based on our commitment to principles that we share (or come close to sharing). This does not mean weak-kneed witness or backing down on issues that matter – it means that our religious beliefs on their own will not convince others that we are right. We need to act, and be clear why we are acting; to live good lives in the name of God so that people can see us; and to understand that the people with whom we are working will have different convictions from our own.

Lesson Three: What Civility Might Look Like

As our social and political communication has changed in recent decades, we have gone from believing that our opponents are wrong to embracing the idea that they are bad people, acting with bad motives. Take abortion, for example. The practice has changed since Roe Vs. Wade was decided, but the conversation has not changed in 50 years. Anti-abortion advocates in particular demonize their opponents and refuse to give any ground. Unless people agree with their idea that abortion is always wrong on every level, anti-abortionists refuse to work with them. They know they will never get pure capitulation from their opponents, and they refuse to accept anything other than that. Leaving “getting everything you want” as the only acceptable outcome characterizes our politics today. (See reverse for the rest of the Takeaway.)

Takeaway Continued

Leaders dazzle followers by refusing to give an inch, and that means that the war goes on forever, with the opponents so entrenched in combat that they make no progress, even in places where they could work together and enact good policies. Healthcare is another example of this kind of argument, with some people refusing to accept any alternative to single-payer, universal healthcare – while in the meantime, millions of people go uninsured. Our issues aren't intractable but the way we deal with them must change – bringing love, sympathy, empathy, and humility to the table and playing the long game. Think of the mustard seed that grows into a tree.

Lesson Four: Getting There

It's better to enact our faith through what we do than to say what we think. The Christian brand has been wrecked because we show off our faith with a lot of saying rather than living by our creed. The most secular generation of Americans in 200 years rates Christians poorly on 7 out of 10 traits – judgmental, anti-gay, and hypocritical, especially. We should show the world that we live what we say we believe. If a decision on a financial/funding issue comes up, should we approach it with a dollars-and-cents analysis -- or should we try to enact God's vision for a world in which we help the poor and live moderately? Do we tell people, when debating issues of policy, that our Christian vision influences our thinking on these issues? If a petition circulated, making affordable housing closer and changing the socio-economic balance at the local school, would we sign it? Would we say that Christ is part of why we make these choices this way? Should we? There's a way for everyone to be a lamp lifted high to give light to others – but that way is different from person to person. If we believe there's a reason for our church to survive, we have to find one we can express – one that is more than just “we like the church, so it should exist.” We should model a wide-awake way of life, deeply rooted in our ancient faith. People should know us by our love – by what we do, giving up ourselves to God's service. We should live lives that say something great about this faith to which we give our lives.

Further Research

Books

[The Holy Vote: The Politics of Faith in America](#) (2009) by Ray Suarez

[Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt](#) (2019) by Arthur C. Brooks.

Online

The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations [Civic Engagement](#) page.

ChurchNext

[Make Me an Instrument of Peace: A Guide to Civil Discourse](#)

[Bridging the Political Divide with Parker Palmer](#)

Civil Conversations in Uncivil Times

with Ray Suarez

Participant's Guide

Welcome!

The 2020 election may be the most contentious in modern history.

Battle lines have been drawn and many people are convinced their party and their candidate are the only alternative to national chaos. Ray Suarez knows a lot about contentious political landscapes. He also knows a great deal about faith. As an award-winning journalist, college instructor, and outspoken Episcopalian, he has written a book on the subject, and offers these four video presentations in this free online class:

- The Challenge of Civility
- Scripture and Civility
- What Civility Might Look Like
- Getting There

This course is ideal for Christians looking for ways to be faithful in the midst of contentious politics.

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