

Tolerance

The flames on the front lawn caught their eyes but the fire was out before they could call the fire department. All that was left were some whiteish thin ashes, a blackened wire brace stuck in the ground and the smell of lighter fluid. Someone had burned their political sign that had urged passersby to vote for a certain presidential candidate and the running mate.

True story. Reported in a brief news item. I cannot remember the state or even which candidates for President and Vice-President of the United States were advertised. Doesn't matter. It is enough to note the burning anger (sorry, had to use that expression), the desire to wipe out a rival opinion, and the belief that the neighborhood could not abide lawn signs of both political opponents.

For me, this incident captured where we are at as passengers on the ship of state that is the United States of America, engaged in struggles that are not restricted to political differences exaggerated to the point of rage. There are divides along many fronts: gender, culture, age, race, economic class, geography, ideology. What separates groups is not only the lack of shared values and world view but, more so, the loss of a basic ingredient for a healthy free society, that is, respect for others' freedom, the freedom to form their opinions and follow their convictions. This is not to say that all opinions and convictions are unassailable. People can be wrong. People can be mistaken. But freely forming one's own judgments and possessing the agency to act accordingly lies at the heart of what it means to be a human being and gives each person a dignity that calls for respect. That respect is called tolerance.

Members of a society exercising tolerance invite disagreement. People can come to conclusions that may be untrue; they can act in certain ways that may be wrong. It is inevitable that free people arrive at differing positions, opinions, and courses of action on a variety of issues. But in a tolerant society these differences are resolved through debate, dialogue, appeals to reason, commonly accepted ethical principles, and political processes through which the needs of varying constituencies are addressed, all the while recognizing the dignity of the other.

Right now, in the United States we do not have a tolerant society. Diverse groups square off to "us" and "them" camps, and differences are settled through the exercise of power. Groups seek domination over the others while subjecting opponents to ridicule, insults, accusation, and calumny.

How does it get fixed? It will not happen in these last days before elections or even with the inevitable inaugural speeches that call for Americans to come together. No, it will happen with leaders - be they political, religious, cultural - being tolerant, that is, respecting the dignity and freedom of opponents and opposing views, and using the tools of civil debate, reason, compromise, and the desire to nurture a society in which everyone can feel at home.