

to Memphis to find it." But the women's efforts paid off: Neal went on to attend law school and later became a judge, retiring as an appellate judge of the Arkansas Court of Appeals. Years later, speaking at Grady's funeral, Neal said, "I credit Mrs. Grady for getting me in the habit of enjoying reading, so that I was able to go to law school and survive," Neal said.

Mildred Grady had a choice that day: she could stop Olly from taking the book or she could encourage his fledgling habit. She could have reported him to the principal, embarrassed him in front of his peers, and ultimately derailed the course of his life: without the book Olly might not have learned to read, to graduate, or to become a judge. There a lot of things Mildred Grady could have done that day. What she choose to do was put herself in Olly's shoes, to understand his predicament, and to quietly encourage him. Using Paul's words, Mildred chose – as she had opportunity – to do good for someone (Gal. 6:10). That choice changed a life and a community.

In light of the recent election, I've been thinking a lot about the things we do that can change the course of a life or a community. Last week I encouraged you to exercise your right to vote, to make your voice heard and your preference known. According to the talking heads on the news, you did just that, in nearly record numbers! I thank you. I'm proud that our citizens take self-governance seriously.

What's surprised and saddened me this week is the hurtful speech splashed across the social media. I'm not easily shocked, but the cruel things being said – on both sides of the aisle – are truly shocking to me. I know that people are reeling from the presidential election results, trying to understand what will happen now; and I know that neither of the major presidential contenders were ideal candidates; and I know that there is great fear and uncertainty across our country.

What I also know is that we are a people who have faced fear and uncertainty before: the Great Depression, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the economic meltdown of 2008, just to name a few. When we come together as a nation, working for the common good, we always face down our fears and rise above our uncertainties. The bile and the bitterness of this past week will not change the election results, nor will it help us to move forward as a nation. So, we have to make a choice: will we live in fear or will we rise to the occasion, seeking God's counsel and the good of our neighbor?

We have every right to feel elated or disappointed about the election's outcome; we have every right to wonder how our elected leaders will perform once they are sworn into office; we have every right to hold them accountable; we have every right to look ahead to the next election when we can make our voices heard and our preferences known again.

What we do not have is the right to turn on one another. We do not have the right to cause another person harm by our words or our actions. We do not have the right to turn our neighbor into our enemy. We do not have the right to censure anyone for exercising their right to vote, even when their opinion differs from ours.

Jesus had his challenges with the leaders of his day. The Pharisees actively sought his life, but Jesus never wrote them off, or tweeted unkind things about them: instead he engaged them in conversation and he tried to show them a better way to live in peace and harmony. Jesus ran afoul of the Roman officials, too, but he patiently answered their questions and healed their sick children. And always, always, Jesus prayed for those who persecuted him.

We have a choice to make, too. Paul puts that choice like this: *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all* (Rom. 12:18). We can choose to make things worse or to make things better. We can engage in healthy and respectful dialogue with our neighbors. We can support of our new Mayor, City Council, and School Board. We can pray that the all our elected officials grow into leaders worthy of the trust placed in them. And we can pray for our friends, neighbors, local legislators, state representatives, and national leaders.

Mother Teresa famously said: "If we have no peace it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." One of the things I love most about this congregation is that you know you belong to each other and you genuinely care about each other. Democrats and Republicans sit side-by-side in the pews. Liberals and Conservatives share fellowship around the coffee tables. Men and Women treat each other with respect. Seniors and Youth come together to pack Operation Christmas Child boxes. And when one of our members is hurting, we come together to help and all those differences go out the window. I've seen it countless times. We know what it means to live out Paul's words: *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* But we must choose daily to live that way.

There are lots of things beyond our control, lots of big issues facing our nation: immigration, gender issues, gun control, affordable healthcare, the environment, and the economy. These are huge issues over which we may have little individual control. But God

doesn't ask us to solve all the world's problems. God asks us to *seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you* (Jer. 29:7). God's directive shrinks a monstrous task down into something more manageable, and it puts the world's problems on a local level. God asks us to do the good we can, where we are, with the people who are close to us.

We seek the welfare of the city when we refrain from posting a hurtful comment on Facebook and engage instead in a respectful dialogue. We seek the welfare of the city when we join a service club or walk for cancer or attend a benefit dinner for someone who is ill. We seek the welfare of the city when we volunteer at the food shelf, or distribute meals in backpacks, or deliver noon meals to seniors, or dispense food at a Food Drop. We seek the welfare of the city when we swing a hammer for Habitat for Humanity, or give to charity, or advocate for safer homes, a cleaner environment, or equal rights for every citizen. We seek the welfare of the city anytime we look past our differences and see our neighbor as a child of God and are attentive to their needs. We seek the welfare of the city when we hold one another in prayer, asking God's blessing on each another.

Each one of us can do this, in our own way, in our own home, in our own neighborhood. Don't try to solve all the world's problems: just find what you can do for the person next to you. As you have opportunity, seek the welfare of the city, and if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Prayer: Holy God, we thank you for the many blessings that our local community possess. We are grateful that we have the freedom to speak up and vote. Even when we differ from those elected as leaders, we pray for them to be blessed by You, God. We pray for those who are in the offices that govern this community and our county, and we pray that they make wise and godly decisions which are always in the best interests of the community. We pray, too for those who are in law enforcement, firefighters, and EMS workers: protect them in their line of duty so that they might protect those of us who have placed our trust in them. Encourage each one of us, as we have opportunity, to seek the welfare of the city, to do good to our neighbor, and to leave peaceably with all. In gratitude for all your many blessings, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Source: "Boy Lifts Book; Librarian Changes Boy's Life." Produced for *Morning Edition* by Vanara Taing. October 2, 2009. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113357239> (Site visited Nov. 8, 2017)

## Seek the Welfare of the City

November 13, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN 56537

Jeremiah 29:7; Romans 12:18; Galatians 6:10

Olly Neal grew up in Arkansas during the 1950s. He didn't care much for high school. One day during his senior year, he cut class – and wandered into the school library where he stumbled across a book written by African-American author Frank Yerby. That discovery changed the life of a boy who was, in Neal's memory, a" troubled high school senior."

The book was *The Treasure of Pleasant Valley* and it had an alluring cover, especially for a teenage boy. Neal wanted to read the book, but there was just a problem: If Neal took the book to the checkout counter, he was sure that the girls who worked at the counter would tell his friends. "Then my reputation would be down, because I was reading books," Neal said. "And I wanted them to know that all I could do was fight and cuss." In order to read the book and preserve his reputation, Neal decided to steal the book.

Later, when he had finished the book, Neal brought it back to the library and carefully replaced it in the same spot he had found it. "And when I put it back, there was another book by Frank Yerby," Neal said. "So I thought, 'Maybe I'll read that, too.' So I took it under my jacket," He read four of Yerby's books that semester, checking out none of them.

Neal's sneaky behavior did not go unnoticed, however. Years later, Neal ran into the school's librarian, Mildred Grady. "She told me that she saw me take that book when I first took it," Neal said. "She said, 'My first thought was to go over there and tell him, boy, you don't have to steal a book, you can check them out — they're free.' Then she realized what my situation was — that I could not let anybody know I was reading."

Grady told Neal she decided that if he was showing an interest in books, "she and Mrs. Saunders [another teacher] would drive to Memphis and find another one for me to read — and they would put it in the exact same place where the one I'd taken was." So, every time Neal took a book home, the pair would set off to the city to find another book for him. "You've got to understand that this was not an easy matter then — because this is 1957 and '58," Neal said. "And black authors were not especially available, No. 1. And No. 2, Frank Yerby was not such a widely known author. And No. 3, they had to drive all the way