In the words the Psalm, we assume our way is the way of the righteous, and anything else is the way of the wicked.

For Heffernan, the neighbor plowing snow from her driveway did not fit with the caricatures she held about people who voted for the “other” candidate; and she had trouble getting past it. We may not be able to do much in the political arena, but Heffernan was talking about a neighbor, and there is much we can do to change our own community.

The divisive language and abusive behavior in the world today often overshadow the things on which we agree. A recent survey revealed that we are not as divided as we think: “Across race, gender, income, education, generation, and 2020 presidential vote, there is stunning agreement on the long-term national priorities that should come to characterize America.” Three priorities emerged on which most Americans agree: “high-quality healthcare as a necessity, not a privilege; an overwhelming commitment to individual rights; and upholding equal treatment for all, but not necessarily equal outcomes.”

The data showed that division in the country stems from intense disagreement on a small number of issues, rather than widespread disagreement across the board. But take note: that small number of issues does not mean those are small issues. They include competing views about climate change, immigration, the availability of high-quality education, fair wage laws, and the degree to which people should actively participate in the democratic process.

Then there was this significant finding: Americans do not prioritize national unity as a long-term aspiration, but they do privately value restoring respect for one another. *That means we still hold one another to be more important than the issues over which we disagree.* Hallelujah! Amen! That’s hugely encouraging! There is still enough common ground, amid all the divisive rhetoric, for us to begin rebuilding respect for one another.

In the New Testament, the apostles Peter and Paul had major disagreements about dietary laws, Jewish customs, and to whom they should preach the Gospel of Jesus. At one point, Paul even says of Peter, “I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned” (Galatians 2:11). Harsh words! But through their disagreements, Peter and Paul held certain things to be true: God is good; God’s love is unconditional; Jesus is Lord; the Spirit unites us with one baptism in one faith. Christians are called to love one another, not to agree on everything; but loving requires a change of heart and attitude that we are often unwilling to make.

Which brings me back to Psalm 1, to the righteous and the wicked. Psalm 1 is not based on politics, nor is it a description of what our political views should be. Rather, the psalm is a meditation on happiness. The first word in the psalm is “Happy” (or “Blessed” depending on the translation which means the same thing as happy). The underlying thought is that the truly blessed have values that are *God*-centered, whereas those who are not blessed are *self*-centered. In the Psalm 1 worldview, happiness comes not from living the high life, but from delighting in the ways of the Lord.

Psalm 1’s use of the word “way,” as in “the way of the righteous” and “the way of the wicked,” tells us that the psalm is about an intentional way of life. The Hebrew word for “way” (*derek*) refers to a path worn smooth by constant walking. So, delighting in the way of the Lord is not an occasional meander, but a route purposely chosen and faithfully walked across a lifetime. From time to time, that way may coincide with how we vote or what social programs we support, but the “way” is not synonymous with either of those things. We need to exercise caution in assuming our fellow Americans who make different decisions about politics or social issues are on the wrong course. That judgment belongs to God.

Eric Liu proposes three steps for a different way forward: more listening, more serving, and more arguing. When Liu says we need “more listening,” many of us want to shout, “I’ve heard enough!” But what he means is listening, not to contradict what someone is saying, but to be radically compassionate, to *hear* someone without judgment, without response.

“More serving” simply means doing more stuff together. This is the genius of community service. It gets you and me together not to work on you or me but focusing on a third thing. Whatever it is that brings people together across lines of race, class, and politics, it will be to the benefit our common humanity.

If we listen more and serve more, will be ready for the third step: arguing more. This sounds counterintuitive, but Liu contends that what we need is not fewer arguments, just fewer *stupid* *ones*. A stupid argument fails to challenge the root causes of abusive systems, preferring to argue about surface-level issues rather than claiming any transformational way forward. Liu says Americans can do better; after all, America does not just *have* arguments; America *is* an argument between strong national government and local control, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, liberty and equality, *Pluribus* and *Unum*. It is loving our neighbor even when we disagree on the issues.

This is high-level thinking! It is advanced discipleship based on God-centered principles. Discipleship does not pretend that all will be peaceful or that it should be. Discipleship acknowledges the never-ending-ness of our struggles, but it also acknowledges that to be a disciple means fighting to make our struggles more useful: more compassionate, more honest, more transformational, more God-centered.

The messages the world is sending are designed to feed our prejudices, fuel our anger, and increase our frustration and helplessness. There is no room to love our neighbor once our mind is fixed on just one attitude and our cold, hating heart begins to hate. Unresolved anger leads to bitterness and the death of relationships.

God offers us a different way, a better way. We can repent of our rebellion against God and our neighbors. We can pray for God’s Holy Spirit to create in us a clean heart and a new and right spirit (Psalm 51:10). We can ask the Spirit to teach our hearts and minds what we need to know to do the “love work” Jesus calls us to do. The work may not be easy, but it is rewarding, for we will know the joy of living in the righteous way that leads to happiness. We may even reclaim love for our neighbor whether they’ve plowed our driveway or not.

Prayer: Loving God, I desire to walk in Your ways and to keep from foolish compromise with the world systems. Keep my heart set on Jesus, so that my thoughts are not influenced by the mindset of this current age. May I be like the man planted by Your many rivers of grace and love, joy and peace, so that Your mercy and compassion may flow through me to the people around me, in the place where You have planted me, in Jesus' name I pray, AMEN.

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**The Snowplow Conundrum**

Sunday, September 19, 2021 Psalm 1

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalm 1 speaks of two and only two kinds of people: the righteous and the wicked. It declares that “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (v. 6). Of course, we know that people do not fit neatly into either category. How does God deal with those of us who are neither altogether righteous nor altogether wicked? The psalm does not tell us. So, we take it upon ourselves to decide who is righteous and who is wicked.

Consider a column that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* after the last presidential election. Virginia Heffernan had a neighbor who openly supported the “other” candidate, so the two were not on speaking terms. Then, one snowy morning, this same neighbor plowed Heffernan’s driveway without being asked; and even worse (according to Heffernan), the neighbor did a great job plowing the snow.

Heffernan called this an act of “aggressive niceness.” Heffernan knew she owed her neighbor thanks, but she wondered “how *much* thanks” she was willing to give someone on the other side of the political divide. Heffernan finally decided that she would “politely, but not profusely,” acknowledge her neighbor’s kindness “with a wave and a thanks, a minimal start on building back trust.” But she admitted: “I’m not ready to knock on the door with a covered dish yet.” Wow! That’s a lot of freight to dump on one act of kindness!

Politics is just one way we sort others into the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked. We divide ourselves by social issues, environmental issues, gender issues, fertility issues, racial issues, issues surrounding the pandemic response, and even how literally to take the Bible. We hold to one side of each issue tightly, leaving little room for debate or consensus because we automatically view the opposing side as “wrong.”

We’ve developed “sides of the aisle,” and draw lines in the sand to clearly delineate our position over and against someone else’s. We’ve also decided that the “other side” is stupid, while they think we are evil. We see each other as caricatures: we embellish certain qualities of a person or group and exaggerate them to ridiculous proportions. The problem is that we believe those exaggerations to be the truth. We pigeonhole people who see things differently from us and assign to them motives that may be false or overstated.