

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
February 18, 2018
1 Peter 3:13-18 (From *The Message*)

Muddy Days

One of the things I enjoyed doing the most in my political career was managing political campaigns. I know that sounds crazy in today's bitter and vitriolic political world with all the claims of "fake news" and candidates who can say or do any offensive thing and get elected. The political world sometimes seems beyond fixing. Government seems broken beyond repair. I hope that is not the case, but I have my fears.

So, back in the 1980's when I was running campaigns and working in Congress there were Republicans and Democrats who actually liked each other and worked together to make good laws. Today it seems that most legislating is about trying to tee-up votes that will make your opponents look bad, rather than really trying to solve the country's problems. One of my boss's closest friends and partners was a Republican senator and my boss was a Democratic member of the House of Representatives. They both had important positions on the all-powerful Committees on Appropriations. Those are the House and Senate Committees that actually make the decisions about where and how your tax dollars are spent. Then, they were the most powerful committees on the Hill.

As a staff member, I worked every day with the Senator's staff to find ways to help our state and the country. They were my friends. The Republican senator and I gave speeches together at events where I was filling in for my Congressman boss. The Senator later wrote a reference for me to get into Divinity School. In those days, government worked. Opponents were, for the most part cordial to one another. And, people who worked together who were of opposite parties would refrain from saying negative things about each other during campaign time. Democratic and Republican politicians sometimes even voted for each other. Imagine that happening today, anywhere.

One of the things I did during the campaigns I managed was to help produce and write television ads. In the last congressional campaign I

managed, negative television ads were just beginning to be more prevalent. Our opponent, who we had barely managed to beat in the last election, was running against us again. He was very well funded by the timber industry. He had worked for a timber cutting company that had been responsible for clear-cutting much of the Pacific Northwest for decades. He started running a negative ad that, shall we say, was stretching the truth quite a bit and played upon the general public's lack of knowledge about the legislative process. We quickly wrote a response ad that had the camera focus on an 8 x 10 picture of my boss, and we actually repeated the claims our opponent was making. Each time the voice over stated a claim a blob of mud was thrown on the picture of my boss. Then as the voice over refuted point-by-point every claim, the mud would fly off. The final tag line was "And after all that he still looks pretty good, doesn't he?" That, my friends, was the end of our opponent's campaign and we went on to win by twice the percentage we had won the previous time.

The point of all this is not really to talk about politics, but to point out what our gospel reading was saying to us this morning. From *The Message* version of 1 Peter, Chapter 32, we heard:

If with heart and soul you're doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you're still better off. Don't give the opposition a second thought. Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy. Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick.

It is not always easy folks, and sometimes today it seems really hard, especially on social media, to speak for the good, the just, the compassionate way of loving your neighbor without someone attacking you. Our politics, our religion, and the public commons and civic life have never seem so polarized, at least to me in my lifetime. But that doesn't mean that we have to buy into it and be part of it. I truly believe it is better to lose speaking kindly of people and speaking truthfully and with courtesy when you are advocating for what you believe in, than winning by tearing down those who disagree with you or think differently than you do. When we each go to our corners with our boxing gloves on, each of us will get

bloodied in the public arena or even in the church if all we want to do is land a punch.

And, we need to teach our children that there is a different way than bullying people to prove your worth or dominate other people. I fear in today's public climate for what our children are observing from so-called role models in public life. I hope and pray that every adult here will be a good teacher of our children and constantly teach that there is another way to live in this world.

I realize that part of the lot of a person of faith is to suffer for living out their principles. And, we all know too well, that bad theology and religion can be abusive and bullying as well. If we worship of a God of love, of fairness, of kindness and compassion, of sacrifice, and of inspiration to heal the world, rather than rule the world, we will be okay. It is when religion is more concerned about blaming, and control and self-righteousness that it gets off track. Focus on love. Focus on forgiveness. Focus on being a compassionate and kind role model. And don't throw mud back when someone throws mud at you for espousing love. As our scripture lesson says, "none of it will stick." Amen.

