Finding Common Ground in an Election Year

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“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” Christian Gospel of Luke 6:12 (NRSV)

This past weekend I watched a television report about a movement happening in Oregon where residents in the eastern part of the state are seeking a referendum to secede and merge with Idaho. The advocates for this movement for a “Greater Idaho” reason that Idaho is closer to their “way of life” than the more populous (and “liberal”) west coast of Oregon.

The report featured an individual who moved his family from a Portland suburb to a small town in Idaho and felt relieved that he was surrounded by people who thought like him, after years feeling marginalized in Oregon for his point of views. Yet, I wonder about those who are actually “marginalized” in Idaho; who live their lives struggling each day for who they are and what they believe.

In my ministry working with ethnic identified, rural, and small-town congregations, I marvel at the courageousness of our UCC churches that strive to bring all voices together in meaningful ways to find common ground. In my experience, unlike the individual who moved from Portland to Idaho, our ethnic identified, rural, and small-town congregations are most often churches that hold members with diverse opinions on societal issues, even passionately opposing views. And yet somehow, they have learned to be in faithful relationship with one another by sustaining themselves as a beloved community.

The continuous talk of the polarization of our country, especially in an election year, seems to cause people to dig in on party loyalty instead of considering what is the best for the country.
The two major political parties seem bent on vilifying the other on their quest to be the majority party to control the Senate and the House. However, does one or two seats in the Senate or a dozen of the 435 seats of the House of Representative “majories” really reflect the will of the people? Policy decisions made by slim margins can create a flip flop of laws that can criminalize people at the expense of their lives. There is no question that a constitutional right to one’s own body, now gone, will brand thousands of otherwise law-abiding citizens as criminals depending on what State she/he/they live in. I can already hear the “if you don’t like it here, leave” mantra and the demand for forced conformity with no room for compromise and common ground. Is this even a democracy, or is it a nation in need of repentance and healing? I don’t believe separating from one another’s space or place is the answer to solving our societal and theological differences.

The United Church of Christ is a denomination with congregations made up from a wide spectrum of theological, social, ethnic, and cultural traditions and beliefs. We don’t always agree, yet what unites us is our loyalty to Jesus Christ as the Head of the Church and that we covenant with one another to follow Jesus, despite our differences. Our tradition of relying on prayer and asking for repentance and healing plays a major role in our lives as disciples of Christ.

I believe we are called to respect and love one another, especially when we disagree. Jesus’ points out that it is easy to love the one that is agreeable with us, but that it is not so with those that hold opposite beliefs to our own. In an election year, where we are so focusing on getting the vote out, we sometimes forget the vote is not the end of it. Rather, it is only a moment in our efforts to come together in our diversity to find common ground for the common good of ALL people.

It is my prayer, no matter the results of the elections on November 8, that on November 9 we may continue the work of finding common ground to heal our divided and hurting nation. In Jesus’s Name, I pray. Amen.

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Rev. Roberto Ochoa M.Div. is the Minister for Ethnic Inclusion and Congregational Support for Rural and Small Churches of the Faith Education, Innovation, and Formation, Justice and Local Church Ministries for the United Church of Christ.
The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenental relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.