

The most recent political elections have clearly shown us once again that our electoral process seriously violates many biblical principles. Perhaps chief among them is the most effective of all political tools - negative advertising. With negative advertising a candidate doesn't have to say a thing about what he or she will actually do, just make the other person look bad. And by making the other person look bad the candidate with the attack message looks good.

This plays on one of the fundamental things we humans do in relationships - not just in the world of politics. And that is to tear someone else down to make us look good. Most everyone does it from time to time; more often for some people and less often for others. If you look back at yourself honestly and critically you can probably think of a time when you've done it too.

Exactly why we do it, I don't know. Perhaps it's an easy thing to do; get favor at someone else's expense without having to earn it yourself. The world of psychiatry tells us that

relationships between two people are inherently unstable and so we enlist a third person and create a relationship triangle. That makes some sense. A stopped bicycle falls over but a stopped tricycle stands easily.

Sometimes people question the historic reality of Adam and Eve in the Bible. I can't answer that specifically, but they sure do have one thing absolutely accurate: making someone else look bad so that they in comparison look good. God accuses Adam, Adam blames Eve. God accuses Eve, Eve blames the serpent. In my sarcastic moments I sometimes think the real reason Adam and Eve had kids was not because of the natural consequences of desire, but in order to have somebody else to blame!

Oh well, such is the tangled web we humans weave.

God of course has a different recommendation for us. Instead of tearing others down in order to make ourselves look good, how about if we build others up and not worry about our own self-image.

When Martin Luther interprets the eighth commandment which is, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." He writes, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander the, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light." I'd love to see how a political election would go if all the candidates would promise to abide by the Eighth Commandment!

These thoughts come from Martin Luther, and he got them from the Bible. In our second reading from Hebrews we come across a very interesting sentence. When talking about how Christians are supposed to live the author writes, "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24)

Now that's not the type of logic we usually use, especially when we think about provoking someone. We usually provoke people to do bad things, not good things. I readily remember a time in high school when my one cousin and I along with a couple other high school friends used to work on a neighboring sheep

farm. We had a beat up old car that we used to drive around from place to place on the farm. Needless to say we didn't treat the car with tender loving care. One day my friends and I successfully provoked my cousin into trying to get the car to ramp over a large pile of rocks in one of the fields. I figured it would be cool to watch if it worked, and if it didn't, my cousin would be in trouble and not me. Making a long story short, it did not work. The car blew out two tires and came to a sudden lurching stop on top of the pile of rocks. When we saw the owner coming to see how everything was going I still remember how we all quickly gathered around the car to make it stop rocking back and forth on top of the pile, and somehow thinking we were shielding it from his view. He wisely recognized that we were all to blame; not just my cousin. Fortunately our only punishment was to get the car off the rocks and fix it.

I have to think harder to come up with times when I've provoked someone to good works. It's a much harder thing to do. I think it comes most naturally when I've been at a sporting event and cheered on a family member or friend. Somehow wanting my support to raise the quality of their performance. Last year when my son was playing little league baseball a couple of the

kids were able to hit homeruns. Ben's hitting was good, but never over the fence. I promised him that if he hit a homerun I'd buy him a particular Lego set that he'd been wanting. To the good fortune of my wallet he never did get a homerun, but his hitting improved enough that he belted many balls against the outfield fence.

Have you ever cheered someone on? Have you ever provoked anyone to love and good deeds? At the surface it is a hard thing to do. It is much easier to tear people down. But our second Bible reading tells us not only that we should do it - it reminds us of the root of how we can do it.

Hebrews is a very confusing book of the Bible. (It is confusing unless you are a Jew from the first century. Then it makes perfect sense.) But the gist of it is this. The world is broken. We humans have abused the freedom God has given us - and God has given us freedom. Instead of building each other up we like to tear each other down. No matter how hard you try, and no matter how much you want to, you can't fix it. You simply aren't powerful enough.

You are surrounded by brokenness in a world that is looking for answers in all the wrong places - accepting cheap imitations of wholeness and pretending to be happy and secure in the midst of confusion and fear. You can't get away from this brokenness. But you don't have to be trapped by it.

You can't fix it, but God can - and has. God has sent a perfect solution - a liberator for you - you know his name - Jesus of Nazareth. He has broken the trap which would bind you. You are freed from it, it does not control you even as you live in it. In the book *Lutheranism* theologian Eric Gritsch writes, "The church is the band of those sent into the world today by word and action: 'Jesus the Israelite is risen, and has death behind him. Therefore, nothing can now overpower his will for you; what will come of the human enterprise, and of your participation in it, is in the hands of this man of hope, and no other. There is reason for all your struggles.'" (Pg. 3)

That is what the book of Hebrews is teaching its first century readers, and low and behold, it fits us perfectly too.

And now, restored you do not have to tear others down to make yourself look good - God's already made you good and restored you to goodness - now you are free to do what you were made to do in the first place - reflect the love and constructive desires of God.

When you can do that you are very fortunate. And there is no greater feeling of wholeness that I know of, then provoking someone to good works and seeing him or her succeed at it. Strive to build up when you can, for much is accomplished when you find the good in others. Amen