

Interpersonal Relations Across Political Divides: People of Faith Building Bridges from Polarization to Reconciliation

A discussion between Former Senator John C. Danforth and Father Matt Malone, President and Editor in Chief of *America Media*

Introductions by Provost Beverly Wendland and Prof. Marie Griffith, both Washington University in St. Louis

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Wendland:

Good evening to you all, and from wherever you are joining us remotely, we're very glad to have you with us tonight. I'm Beverly Wendland, Provost of Washington University in St. Louis and I'm delighted to welcome you all to today's event sponsored by the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. Our event tonight is called "Interpersonal Relations Across Political Divides: People of Faith Building Bridges from Polarization to Reconciliation." Before we begin tonight's discussion, I would like to share with you some information about the Center. The Center is comprised of a dedicated group of scholars and professionals working to support outstanding analysis of the historical and contemporary intertwining of religion and politics. Its aim is to educate students and the public through courses, publications, and events like this one, all while modeling discussion and debate that values each person's humanity at the cornerstone of a productive democracy. I imagine this audience needs no reminder of the critical importance of such efforts in today's environment and we are fortunate to have these faculty members working in this space here at Washington University.

Today's event is particularly special because it features the Center's inspiration and namesake, St. Louis's own John C. Danforth. Senator Danforth is an ordained episcopal priest and a former U.S. Senator from Missouri who has had a long and distinguished political career. He has long been a sound source of wisdom concerning today's urgent and ever timely topic of building bridges from polarization to reconciliation and the Center has been fortunate in being able to host occasional public conversations between Senator Danforth and other eminent guests. With him in conversation today is his very good friend and a renowned educator, writer, and public thinker Father Matt Malone. Father Malone is the President and Editor in Chief of *America Media* and a Jesuit priest with a lengthy record of service and contributions of his own in the areas of religious education and journalism. Beyond his work at *America Media*, where he covered U.S. politics and foreign affairs from 2007 to 2009, his writing has appeared in numerous national and international publications and he's been featured in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, among others. I want to welcome both of you to Washington University and say how pleased I am that we can host you together. Thank you so much for being here. And so now, I want to turn things over to today's moderator, Marie Griffith, who is the John C. Danforth Distinguished Professor in the Humanities here at Washington University. She also directs the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics. Marie.

Griffith:

Thank you so much Provost Wendland and thank you to all of you who are joining us via Zoom and YouTube for this special discussion between Senator John Danforth and Father Matt Malone, which will last about an hour. As many of you know, our Center on Religion and Politics offers a wide a diverse array of programming, hosting scholars and professionals of many kinds, lawyers, journalists, and political figures for instance, for public events like this one. We also bring religious leaders across many faith traditions, sometimes to converse across religious divisions and sometimes to discuss matters within a shared religious tradition and so, today we bring together two leaders within the Christian tradition, although from different branches of Christianity. As the Provost just noted, Senator Danforth is an ordained episcopal priest who has presided over many religious occasions and ceremonies, including notably officiating at the funeral of Ronald Reagan and Father Malone is a Roman Catholic priest whose influence from his post as President and Editor in Chief at *America Media* is vast. Both have written for broad public audiences, books, essays, editorials, you name it.

In a *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece that they co-authored together last fall, the two write the following: “today, a growing number of Americans regard their political opponents not as fellow citizens with whom they disagree, but as enemies, as politically, socially, and even morally irredeemable. Millions of Americans consume news in echo chambers, while countless numbers have lost friends or even turned away from family over political disagreements.” The two leaders then turn to a discussion of the Christian practices in both their churches that may provide a practical model for reducing polarization and transform the tone of politics, a step, they write, “toward bridge building and away from confrontation.” Together, they declare, Christians “have a mandate to take up such a ministry of reconciliation, to help heal this country.” Senator Danforth and Father Malone have continued their dialogue since that time and we’re very fortunate to have this opportunity to listen and engage with them, learn from them, and who knows, maybe we can even contribute something to their thinking. Those of you on Zoom can use the Q&A feature to send in questions for them to address if we have time and thanks to several of you who sent questions in advance. We’ll try to get to those as well. So, send a question anytime while we’re going.

Now, I just want to take a couple of final minutes here at the outset to give a king of overview of the problem that they are tackling as context for our conversation. How polarized are we really? Here’s some data for you. According to a recent analysis by the Public Religion Research Institute, 81% of republicans say that democratic party has been taken over by socialists and 78% of democrats feel that the republican party has been taken over by racists. Just two weeks ago, the Pew Research Center released a report on the media echo chambers on both the left and the right. The report analyzed the Americans who, in 2020, consistently got their news only from these echo chambers or primarily from them and it won’t surprise you to hear that the report concluded misinformation and competing views of reality abound, but what Americans categorized as made-up news varied widely and often aligned with partisan views. In other words, fake news is everywhere. Everyone agrees about that, but we disagree about what’s fake and what’s true. Now, it’d be one thing if the people holding these competing and highly partisan views of reality could nonetheless get along and love one another, but the greater problem—greater even than the fact of political polarization—is the forceful breakdown. In our personal relationships that has resulted. Consider the issue of unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking people on social media because what they posted about politics. Father Malone wrote about this

issue in his wonderful essay “Pursuing the Truth in Love,” noting that social media often exacerbates existing ideological partisan divisions by confirming only those viewpoints with which we are already more inclined to agree and another expert writes, “both sides tend to view themselves as eminently fair and right and the other side as irrational.” We’re flattening people out in terms of our view of them and we’re not really seeing the full complexity of people on the other side and just to conclude with a couple of more data points here. In November, the Conservative Institute for Family Studies estimated that 79% of American marriages are comprised of couples who share the same political party identification. Now, 21% are mixed, but most of the “mixed” marriages are between partisans and independents, rather than democrats and republicans. This is the result of a steady drop in the share of politically mixed marriages and a corresponding rise in Americans’ intolerance toward inter-political marriage. Democratic parents don’t want their kids marrying republicans and vice versa. Finally, a recent civility poll out of Georgetown University found that the average voter believes the U.S. is two-thirds of the way to the edge of a civil war. The good news from that poll is that eight in ten voters want compromise and common ground. Eight in ten. That is very good news indeed. So, with all of this in mind, I want to turn to you, Senator Danforth and Father Malone, and ask what you think about this. So, Senator, let’s start with you. Do you think I’ve given an accurate depiction of today’s political polarization and its very negative impact on personal relationships and what more would you want to say about the situation?

Danforth:

Well, Marie, you’ve done such a good job of teeing up the discussion, I don’t know what to add. I think you’ve done it. No, I think this is absolutely right. It’s—I had a conversation not long ago with a man who used to work with me when I was in the Senate, maybe three or four decades ago, and he stayed on in politics and in government and he’s a big observer of the U.S. Senate over a very long period of time and he said, you know, the problem now is that people in the Senate don’t just disagree with each other. They hate each other. That’s a big deal because it’s very hard to come together on anything politically, and that’s what politics is, right, it’s trying to figure out how to put policy together. It’s very difficult to do that if people hate each other, they just can’t stand being with each other. Another friend of mine who is still in the Senate told me that he couldn’t think of five people, colleagues of his, whom he would like to have over to his house for dinner. It’s a very very big deal and a very big change for, you know, I mean—you reach a certain point, and you talk about the good old days and I think about the good old days and they were good in the U.S. Senate. I loved being there when I did, but now two things. One, people do, I think, hate each other, and secondly, they don’t really do anything. So, the system now malfunctions. It’s a dysfunctional Senate. It’s a dysfunctional government. I think most people realize that and I think part of it, a lot of it, is brought about by this extreme polarization, which is individualized, where people just don’t want to be in the same room with each other.

Griffith:

Father Malone, could you speak to this as well and I know you’ve written about this in that wonderful essay “Pursuing the Truth and Love” and many other places. Why have we become so polarized and why is this such a threat?

Malone:

Well, first of all, I should say thank you for inviting me into this conversation. The reason it's such a threat just at a political level is because according to your statistics or the statistics that you cited, we have a majority of democrats who think that republicans are racist and a majority of republicans who think that democrats are socialists, and a majority of Americans are neither racist nor socialist. So, they are not represented in some way, at least according to people's perceptions, in either of our major parties, but that signals a real breakdown. It's evidence of the profound polarization that we have in our country and the constitutional arrangements of the American republic are organized around systems that are meant to produce compromise, that are meant to make the many one, as in the national motto. So, that is the profound threat on a political level. I'd say that the second—there are a number of reasons why this polarization exists, but I would say that one of the main causes, in addition to the others, but this is the one I'll address, is the one that you cited, which is how information is consumed. We forget sometimes, newspapers, magazines, cable news channels, they can do great and noble things. Journalists do great and noble things every day, but they also exist to create mass markets for advertisers and in a marketplace where the attention is so diffused, where there are so many different media platforms, the way that you build that market for advertisers is by slicing off different parts of the demographic. So, in other words, back in the day when there were three major television networks, the way you built a network was by bringing together liberals and republicans and the Midwest and the northeast and so forth around respected incredible figures. It was not a problem free model by any stretch of the imagination, but it worked on one level. Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson who agreed on nothing both watched Walter Cronkite and so at least they had the same information when they were engaged in their debate and I think a lot of us aren't aware, even beyond newspapers, magazines, cable television, of how our own news feeds in social media are structured, that they in Facebook and in Twitter and so forth, they're also in the business of creating markets for advertisers and the way that they do that, the way that they group us is through a system of algorithms, complex digital formulas, so that when I like something I see, say on Facebook or on Twitter, it starts sending me more of that content and connecting me with other people who like that. Now, that doesn't sound like such a bad thing in the abstract and it isn't, but that force, what has the effect, ensuring that we're only exposed to ideas, opinions, and people with whom we're already inclined to agree and so, it's not the fact that we've given up on the idea that there are objective facts. Most people still believe that there are facts and objective realities. They disagree about what the objective reality is because they're in a—they're basically in silos separated from one another and not looking at the same data and, you know, my third point would be simply that there is distinct, I think, Christian call in all of that. In the end, we who profess to be disciples of Jesus Christ are called to love our enemies. I don't think of any, you know, decent American as my enemy by any stretch of my imagination, but as Senator Danforth just said, many people do, even in the United States Senate, and so, what—the questions that the Center and I have been raising, first in the *Wall Street Journal* and then elsewhere, have to do with what can we specifically as Christians, drawing on our tradition, offer as a solution to this problem, a solution that could be accessible to non-Christians too.

Griffith:

Yeah, and I very much—I want us to get to that—just a couple more short questions about the polarization itself and how we got here. I guess, you know, thinking and Senator, I might direct

this at you because I know you've thought about this a lot, what do you think are the trends that have exacerbated this problem, really on both the right and the left as you see it?

Danforth:

One I think is that politics has become too much. Instead of just being a part of life, it's been all-consuming, and it's become for I think a lot of us what Tillich referred to with regard to faith when he said ultimate concern. Faith is a matter of what's your ultimate concern. I think people are inundated by politics now. The 24-hour news channel, Twitter, all of this is relentless, so that instead of—as Father Malone said—instead of a half an hour watching news, with everybody watching the same thing, it's now all the time and every news program is breaking news. Everything is breaking. Everything is hyper urgent. So, it's very—if politics becomes everything, then it pushes aside other things, namely family, namely interpersonal relationships, friendships, everything else. So, if people immediately start lining up in a partisan way or in a political way and not in a personal way, it creates this animosity, this anger, which in turn feeds dysfunction in politics. I think that's where we are now. I think that's a very very big thing, that it's become too much. I've told this story before in one of our programs at Washington University, but it involves an election that I thought I was going to lose that I didn't, but I thought I was going to lose in this election and I was, I guess, showed my anxiety and my then 15-year-old daughter Dede said to me well, it's not the world series, and that's true. I mean, politics isn't the world series and it certainly isn't religion and it certainly isn't ultimate concern and to make it so is to create this situation that we have now, which doesn't work.

Griffith:

Yeah, thank you. Yeah, Father Malone, just on this point about interpersonal relationships and, you know, of course, all of us have thought so much about this in the past years when interpersonal relationships have been so difficult to sustain and so many of us are isolated and lonely and maybe appreciate those interpersonal all the more, but at this point the Senator is making about the importance of interpersonal relationships, how important they are to making politics itself work in our larger civil society. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that as well.

Malone:

Sure, but I think the Senator is absolutely right in that we are in a situation where a kind of personal politics is impossible because of all the forces that we've been talking about and, you know, David Brooks, a columnist for the *New York Times* said, I think it was about two years ago in one of his columns, something that just really rang true with me. He said, you know, if we're going to save a republic, politics has to become less important and that's because of precisely what Senator Danforth is talking about. The whole political system is not designed for us to be obsessed with politics 24 hours a day seven days a week. There's always been a certain viciousness, nastiness, incivility in American politics and historians will tell you tale after tale about what Jefferson said about Adams and Adams said about Jefferson. It's nasty stuff, but at the end of the day, you cast your votes and the world went on. People went back to their homes. They went back to their farms. They went back to their shops and they didn't think about politics until two years later when they had to vote for Congress again or four years later when they had to vote for president, presuming that they had the vote. The problem today is that, as I said, that the whole constitutional arrangement of the country is not designed to support a world in which politics is our principle past time and this converges with another reality, which I think of from

the theological point of view, which is we live in an increasingly secularized world in which people are not, you know, people have values. Most people have decent values around love and justice, friendship and so forth, but they have become disillusioned with organized religion of every kind and the data shows that. In a world in which people are cut off from communities or ways of thinking about the transcendence, right, then what is immediate and material and here and now becomes all the more important and that raises the stakes of our politics, right. So, in other words, our disagreements, then, because if what is here and now is what is most important, then our disagreements become not a thorn in the side, it becomes a dagger in the heart and increasingly, politics takes on this kind of liturgical quality and the symbols of politics become sacralized and when politicians almost are seen as oracles of truth, in some way, in the way that priests and ministers and rabbis used to, that's a dangerous trend because the entire constitutional system of the country presupposes that that's a kind of data—that's a kind of meaning that Americans are going to find somewhere else, not in politics, not in government, but somewhere else and that's why there's a First Amendment.

Griffith:

Well, yeah, let's pursue this about religion and, you know, I'm very mindful that religion sometimes has a very negative impact on politics and Senator Danforth, your 2006 book, *Faith in Politics*, focused a lot on what had been wrong with, you know, certain ways of thinking about religion and politics, but, you know, Christianity and really all religious traditions, we could be talking about any religious tradition here and really, I think secular humanism too, but what does Christianity have to say to all of this? Senator Danforth, you wrote a great deal about this in your most recent book, *The Relevance of Religion*, which was much more about the positive contributions of Christianity. So, talk to us about the traditional religious values that you think should have a prominent role in America's politics.

Danforth:

If you accept the kind of facts that you laid out, Marie, in your introduction and you're concerned that we've become terribly polarized as a country and that it's caused a breakdown in politics and in how government should work and also a breakdown in interpersonal relationships, then the question is what do we do about it? I mean, is there—what do we say? What do we do and is there something or are there some things that Christians have to say that nobody else is saying and that therefore becomes—should become our ministry. So, it's not that Christianity or religion presents itself exclusively, you know, year in, year out, it's the opposite of that. It's an outreach, it's a ministry that we think that we have or at least I think should think that we have to the country as a whole, which is in St. Paul's phrase, a ministry of reconciliation that we, from the standpoint of our religious faith, speaking from our faith, are ministers of reconciliation and that we have a responsibility to the country to be a healing presence in our country. I believe that's true. I think that there are real things that we have to say that nobody else is saying and that this is our—should be our gift. Now, it is certainly true that the history of religion has been the opposite. It's been divisive. People have killed each other believing that it's God's will to do that. Religious wars were very much in the minds of the framers of our constitution, particularly when in the writing—the First Amendment to the constitution, the religious clauses. They were very concerned about the harm that religion can do and that is true, and it is very possible to use religion today and it is used to create wedge issues that simply rile up the base that make people mad, us against them, but the opposite is also possible and it's possible to see religion as a

binding force and something that holds us together and a ministry that we have to try to hold together a fracturing country.

Griffith:

Father Malone, I'd love to hear your response to that, and I just want to add something to what the Senator said. Looking at your essay, "Pursuing the truth in Love," which I know is also *America Magazine's* motto, you wrote this "if we are to avoid further narcissistic divisions in the church or secular society, then we must proceed in a penitential key, from our powerlessness, from a lived acknowledgement of the sheer gratuity of our creation and redemption." I just—I think that is so beautiful, so I just wanted to add that in as something that I think is a very Christian sentiment that you've raised in that point.

Malone:

Thank you, and I think—I mean, not only is that—proceeding in that penitential key the mandate I think we received by virtue of our faith as Christians, and in that essay, I was speaking primarily to a Christian audience, but it was also the only way that we're going to be credible because if we enter into this conversation, proceed in this discourse as just one more force organized for public action and aligned with one party or the another, we're not going to succeed. We have to bring that part of our tradition that is strongest and most unique to us and in my mind, that is just the fact that we believe that we are created in love and we are redeemed in love and so, the witness—the political witness of Christians have—it has to visibly be that of people who believe that they are created in love. I mean, I agree with what Senator Danforth said. I would place a little bit different emphasis on it in that the—there's no doubt that the people of every faith and within every religion have created conflict and driven conflict and aligned in conflicts throughout history. It's also the case that, you know, the most violent conflicts in history have been those that were in the name of the state, right and that's an important piece, not as a historical argument, but from my point of view, the more profoundly challenging issue here is not how various religious figures and groups have disfigured American politics or made it more combative or tribal, which is undoubtedly true. It's how has this all-consuming political warfare actually disfigured our faith communities, right, so that our faith communities, which are by design meant to transcend these divisions, right, are simply caught up in them. So, in my own church, the Catholic church, these endless debates, can you be a Catholic and be a democrat, can you be a Catholic and be a republican, you know, a real Catholic wouldn't support this legislation, a real Catholic would oppose this legislation. What that tells me is that the whole terms of our conversation are just baptized versions of the terms of our secular conversation. That's bad for churches and faith communities generally, but it's even worse if you consider that we're called to somehow try to fix the problem on the secular side. So, the first thing that we have to do is just clean up our own house and recognize that we've been co-opted in this extraordinarily powerful national force.

Griffith:

Well, a number of our attendees have pointed out in the Q&A the significance of abortion as, you know, one of these very very deeply divisive issues and, you know, if either of you have thoughts on that particular issue and how to resolve some of that, I know they'd love to hear some of that. I will also say we had one of our students, a religion and politics minor, who's really interested in your thoughts, Senator Danforth, on the future of conservatism and the sort of

perversion of it that, I think, you have expressed very recently in some of your public writings, which is another really interesting point. But, to hold onto this religion thread for a minute, we also have a number of people who wrote to us in advance and are writing here who note that they're secular themselves and also deeply love their country and are also profoundly concerned about the issues that we're raising here tonight and so, I guess I'd be interested—and Senator, I'll start with you—in how, you know, a very Christian message translates to all Americans, Muslim, Jewish, you know, whatever, secular, atheist, and how you create that sort of message for all.

Danforth:

It has to do with how we go about politics and practicing politics and as I said earlier, it's not, you know, okay, well, we're Christians, we're right. What can we say that does resonate with the country as a whole and that is healing with the country as a whole? Well, one thing that we have to say is just what Father Malone has written about and has talked about, namely truth is, from the standpoint of Christianity, you should—you explain this better than I can, but truth is not an ideology. It's certainly not a political ideology. Truth is a person, and the person is Christ and whom we meet in love and through whom we meet others in love. A second point is that to understand that our political opponent, somebody who totally disagrees with us, is made in the image of God. This is a child of God we're talking about. It's not a thing. It's not a political position. This is a human being created in the image of God and finally, it's a message of humility because when we put central in our lives politics, a political position, a political party, a political ideology—when we do that, we have created an idol. So, there's so much, particularly in the Hebrew Bible, about idolatry. Well, right now, you know, in America and in the 21st century, people are not creating idols out of silver and out of gold. They're creating idols out of ideologies and positions that they put first and foremost in their lives. So, this message of humility is a very important one and to say, as Isaiah did, my ways are not your way, says the Lord, your thoughts are not my thoughts. It's very important to understand our human limitations and to represent that to the country as a whole.

Griffith:

Father Malone, do you want to respond further to that?

Malone:

Sure, I'd be happy to and actually, I will say a word about abortion because I think that is an interesting—that question and how it's dealt with in politics is a big part—it's a symptom of the problem, by which I mean, you know, we were talking earlier about how a majority of Americans don't see themselves in either of these political parties and yet, you know, we have one party that says there ought to be abortion unrestricted and on demand and we have another that says it ought to be restricted as much as possible. The vast majority of the American people don't feel—they don't associate themselves with either of those positions. They occupy some middle ground and that doesn't mean that they're confused morally because they're wrestling with the morality of the question and there are competing goods—there are competing values at stake here or if they're not in direct competition, they're releasing tension with one another and the American people sense that and, you know, their feelings about this issue, in addition to the number of others, are not extreme and yet, how it's presented in the partisan makeup of our national politics is only in an extreme way and so that, to me, is very indicative of the problem. There's no space in between the extremes where we can debate and talk through these issues and

to the point that Senator Danforth was making, as Christians approach that conversation, presuming that space exists and we enter into it, we have to enter into it in—as I said in that piece—in that penitential key and something that Senator Danforth said is absolutely correct. I mean, for a Christian, truth is ultimately a person. One is the way, truth, and the life and that means two things. That means we never possess the truth. We simply dare to hope that he possesses us, that he possesses our hearts and if we don't enter into the public discourse from that mindset, from that sort of fundamental reality and we're more likely to do harm than good and the second thing is that the ultimate reality of truth being a person for Christians means is that Christians don't just believe that Jesus is, you know, the message of God. For Christians—or certainly, I should say for Roman Catholics, Jesus Christ is both the revelation of God itself and the means of that revelation and so, when Christians enter into the public discourse, we have to remember that it's not just—it's not good enough to be right. You also have to be charitable because if the means and the content of revelation are the same from the person that we seek to serve, then nothing that is—nothing can ultimately be called truthful, even if it's actually accurate, if it's not spoken in charity because how we say things is as important as what we say because it was for God.

Griffith:

I really appreciate that and, you know, to sort of tie your point about charity into Senator Danforth's about humility and this goes back to your points about abortion, I guess. You know it always strikes me, one of the problems that we have is that political opponents call each other names and call each other's positions names and so, pro-choice activists often, you know, refuse to use the term pro-life. They say anti-choice. They call their opponents that and pro-life folks don't always call their opponents pro-choice, they call them pro-abortion, you know, which a lot of pro-choice people say is inaccurate and, you know, there are other terms like this, like identity politics. I think that, you know, oftentimes there's a conservative argument against identity politics and it's a pejorative, you know, people involved in Black Lives Matter don't think of themselves as doing identity politics, they're working for equal rights and for justice. So, it seems to me that one of the, you know, practical things people could do in the spirit of charity and humility is not call each other names or minimize the concerns, you know, of the other side on either side and both sides do this, as you pointed out. One of our listeners wrote in advance to ask an important question and this is coming up in the Q&A a bit too and it has to do with racism and this person put it this way: "racism and bias are obviously baked into every aspect of our society. How will better interpersonal relations help eliminate the policies and practices of systemic racism?" You know, how do we make that connection? So, Senator, maybe I'll start with you and then Father Malone, if you'd like to speak to that too, just one of the central issues of our moment.

Danforth:

We certainly have a history in our country: a history of slavery, a history of Jim Crow, a history that has created disadvantage for African Americans that is baked into America today. There is no doubt about that and it's measurable. It's measurable by health, by life expectancy, by education, by income, by anything, everything else that we could imagine. So, it's a very real problem. I think that the overwhelming majority of people in our country are good people and the overwhelming majority of people in our country are fair people and they want to treat others fairly and when they see a problem, they want to do what they can to fix it. So, I think that it's

important to appeal to that basic goodness, not assume that the person next to you is a racist but assume that this is a good person who wants to be part of the solution and is not personally part of the problem. So, that to me, it's recognizing the goodness. On the question—when you mention—on abortion, so, there's this wonderful thing, I think I wrote about it in a book, there was this marvelous marvelous person named Loretto Wagner and she was the head of the Missouri Citizens for Life, so, she was a very devout Roman Catholic and very much into pro-life and was a person who organized the January trips to Washington, great person and she had the idea of reaching out to the head of the largest abortion clinic in our state and she contacted this other woman and they started meeting together and they started breaking bread together and—with their spouses, starting just to talk about other things, about their children and their families and what they really care about. From that relationship grew some practical answers to specific issues so that the abortion clinic also became an adoption center as well. It offered opportunities for adoption and very specific things that they were able to work together. So, it was taking even the most—maybe the most divisive issue of them all and looking at it from an interpersonal basis and what can we do personally. I think that that's true of race and I think that it's true about a lot of what divides our country. Can we figure out ways that we can get together, meet together, break bread together in a way that turns out to be healing and I think the answer to that is yes and I think it's very important.

Griffith:

Father Malone?

Malone:

Yeah, I would say that that kind of work, that interpersonal work, dialogue, sitting down, people not ideas, just people, and not ideas of people, but actual people and talking through these difficult issues is not just helpful, it's absolutely indispensable. I mean, I, you know, I also worked in politics for a while. I'm not at the level that Senator Danforth did, but, you know, I worked for Congress for a while and, you know, I was, in my own marginal way, part of making change and in—at the end of the day, real change happens from a change of heart and hearts are changed by other hearts. That's just the way the world really works in the end. You know, the reason why there is an acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships in this country today is because people started coming out in the 1980s and 90s and so forth and other people then realized oh my gosh, this is a member of my family. This is my friend. This is—and all of a sudden, this idea became personalized and it changed. It changed people. It changed hearts. You know, a lot of people tend to think that that papers over our differences, that means that we don't fight for what we believe in, that we can't bring the prophetic element of the Christian tradition into the discourse. It means exactly the opposite. It's what makes genuine argument and disagreement possible is that interpersonal peace, that heart to heart conversation where you can disagree, you can fight for different outcomes, but you don't hate each other because at the end of the day, if that's where we end up then we have not succeeded in undoing racism of any kind because it's rooted in hate, right. The other thing I would say is I myself, you know, I mean, I'm a white man. I grew up in a middle-class family in Massachusetts and, you know, when all of this was happening last summer, I wrote an article for my readers and it was called "An Open Letter to White America." Not all my readers are white, but a lot of them are and I was writing to them and I said this was my experience and, you know, there's value to ideas of systems and philosophies and all the rest, but I think what I wanted to introduce to them was a personal

language, a way of talking about this that could help them make sense of these things in their own lives. So, I talked about, you know, growing up in a family where some of my family were prejudiced and they used language that is completely unacceptable and how I responded to that and how I didn't respond to that. I tried to do that in an honest way and how I think that the, you know, the reality of the history of race in this country has, you know, shaped my own world view for good and ill and what I saw in the responses to that piece were a lot of people disagreed, a lot of people agreed, but it was hard to agree or disagree because we were talking about our experience and what I found there was the piece gave people a lot of—gave them permission to talk about their experience in a way that, for whatever reason, they didn't feel they had before and so, yeah, well you know what, I had a grandmother and this is what I also experienced in my own life and I think that that kind of work—it's absolutely critical. Hearts are changed by hearts and so are minds, by the way. Minds aren't—we're more often changed by hearts than minds.

Griffith:

Hearts are changed by hearts and so are minds, that's lovely. I mean I think what both of you are talking about is intentional conversation and the cultivation really of ultimately relationships and I know the two of you are in conversation constantly sort of, you know, working through your ideas about this and, you know, I'd be interested—I know our attendees are always wanting more in terms of practical solutions, you know. We can all agree that this would be better. We can all agree that these values would be better but how, in our daily lives, do we do that. So, Senator again I'll start with you, just to think, you know, how, what takeaways would you give to folks here, who really believe in much of what you all are saying, but, you know, maybe need more practical thoughts about that.

Danforth:

I think what we need is a broad-based public movement that enlists just a lot of people. So, it's not a matter of, you know, a couple of people talking about this, but something very practical to do. So, Father Malone and I have been in contact with a man named Adam Hamilton and he is the pastor of the largest United Methodist church in the world, it's outside of Kansas City and so, we've been thinking together okay, is there some practical thing—little thing, but something that has real impact. Last—I think it was last Christmastime—Adam Hamilton and his church, they made yard signs and t-shirts and the yard signs said, “love your neighbor.” That's what they said, love your neighbor. Well, now that's something real, you know, it says something. It says something very meaningful. There was a story not long ago in one of the newspapers about these two families in Pittsburgh. One was a republican family. One was a democratic family. One was for Trump. One was for Biden and they got to know each other and not talking about politics, just know each other as families. So, they had these yard signs outside their house: Trump, Biden, but they also had yard signs with arrows pointing to each other's home and the yard sign said, “we heart them.” Now, that's kind of a neat little thing and to figure out ways to replicate that. So, it just puts in our minds the idea that we should treat people as friends and not as enemies.

Griffith:

Father Malone?

Malone:

Yeah, I would say I, you know—the founder of the Jesuits, the Catholic order that I belong to, St. Ignatius was a very practical person and he understood human behavior very well, I think. I'm now showing that Jesuits aren't the most modest people in the world, but he had practical suggestions for things like this, so he said, you know, if you feel blocked like you feel like you're being pulled into something negative, then you go out of your way to try the positive, right and even if you don't have the grace of loving your neighbor that you disagree with, you can still act in a way that you think you would act if you did, right. So try that and that can mean anything, but in this context, it could mean we go out of our way to be reasonable people with whom we disagree, like let's break up our newsfeeds and expose ourselves to opinions of people who are saying something important that we may disagree with, but, you know, place ourselves in a position to hear it. It means going out of our way to meet people that we disagree with, you know, the 2016 election was one of the closest in American history and you know 60% of Americans live in a congressional district that voted for Trump or Clinton by 20 points or more, right. So, we don't even live in the same neighborhoods as the people with whom we disagree, but try to go out and find them, and then, as the Senator said, when you do, don't talk about politics right off the bat, get to know each other, have a cup of coffee, ask them what's important in their life and how their family's doing and how their work is and then when—as a third step, practical step, when you do get to the conversation about politics, listen for values. Listen for values. What is the value that this person is expressing that's behind their position with regard to disagreements because more often than not, you're going to realize that you actually have the same values in common, but you're applying them in very different ways, but if you can agree on that it creates a space where you can now talk about how you disagree on how you apply it. The problem with the discourse right now is there's all of this motive questioning in our political conversation and we call into question not just the position that our opponent takes or our interlocutor, we're calling into question their values, whether they believe, whether they're decent human beings. I'll just say as a last thought that the—for another article that I'm writing, I recently revisited President Kennedy's address at American University in the spring of 1963, where he departed from the post-war policy of confrontation with the Soviet Union and called for us to rethink our engagement and he said in that address, because, you know, at the end of the day, we all breathe the same air, we all inhabit this same planet, we all cherish our children's future, and we are all mortal and in the context of this huge Cold War, clash of the superpowers in which people older than I were taught that the Soviet Union were evil, terrible, awful, we had to defeat them absolutely, he was calling us to recognize their humanity and I thought gee, America could do that with somebody—with a foreigner, we ought to be able to do that with our fellow Americans.

Danforth:

I might add just a couple of thoughts. One is just in interpersonal relations, don't pounce on the other guy. I think that there is—I mean, you see this a lot and you see it in politics, you see it in culture, of looking at—sort of combing through everything anybody has ever said in his or her history, looking for the worst possible interpretation and just jumping on it. So, I think that a degree of forgiveness in just treating people is okay. I'm not just going to look for the worst and pounce on you, I'm going to look for the best and I'm going to be very forgiving and generous in my treatment of you and then the second thought that I have is the ability to laugh. The ability to laugh with each other. It was such a big deal back in, you know, in my days in the Senate, I mean, we had good laughs right across party lines. I talked to an incumbent Senator who said

you know, we never laugh, and the reason is we're afraid we're going to be tape recorded and it's going to be—whatever we say is going to be used against us in the next campaign. So, when you think—one of the great examples of humor of two people who disagreed on politics in general, Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill. I mean they laughed with each other and they liked each other, and they disagreed with each other and government worked.

Griffith:

Yeah, that's a great point. I mean, just thinking about these small things that people can do in their everyday lives. You know, it's been a rough few years though, you know, and as somebody just wrote into the Q&A and said, you know, specific political policies really do have life-shattering consequences for people and so, that's the difficult thing is that I don't think people now see their political opponents as, you know, wanting to get to the same goal but maybe in different ways. They really see them as pursuing an evil path or pursuing a path that's going to do damage to others. So, we're really in a bind, I think, right now and, you know, after recent years and, you know, these things that you all are suggesting I think are very helpful, but the healing, I think, will take a while. So, we're coming to the end of our hour here. I'd just like to invite each of you to maybe—any final thoughts, some hopeful takeaways to give to our audience. You've said so much already, but Father Malone, maybe I'll start with you on this one. Some final thoughts.

Malone:

Sure, you know, I was just thinking about what Senator Danforth said. He said, you know, don't just bash somebody over the head when you find out that they have a different opinion than you do and, you know, I think he put that in his very down to earth Missouri way, but the theological piece behind that, for Christians, is really really important and that is, you know, we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, were called to be holy, not necessarily right. I mean, we can have all the right answers, but if we're asking the wrong question, it doesn't matter and we can have all the right answers, but if we're not loving and forgiving people, if we are not generous in spirit, if we are not civil, then we will have failed because that—those are necessary components to holiness and that's what we're ultimately called to do. The last thing I would say is I appreciate that, the comment that one of our viewers gave. The stakes are very very high and yes, policy decisions have real consequences. It can have—they can liberate people and they can destroy lives and communities. It's easy to get it wrong. It's also the case that that has always been true. That has always been true throughout the history of the United States. The Constitution itself, as we well know, is a flawed doctrine. There's—but the three-fifths compromise was an attempt to limit the power of slave-holding states, not to extend them. Politics is not the forum for cleansing the world of evil. It's not capable of that, but it is a forum in which we can, to the best of our ability, find ways of living together in peace and of helping people who live on the margins of society to find their way to the center of it, but that requires, today, requires compromise and it requires something which we did have throughout much of the history of this country and until the last 20 or 30 years and that is a willingness to engage in spirited argument about public policy that didn't call into question the values, the motive, character of our interlocutors, our opponent.

Griffith:

Thank you. Senator?

Danforth:

Well, thank you, Marie, for organizing this and thanks to Father Malone for being a part of it. He really is terrific. I love being on programs with Father Malone. When I—I told him before this I said I don't know what I'm going to say except I agree with Father Malone, but he is so good and so bright and it's just wonderful to be on a program with him. So, I think this, I think that za great national purpose of America is very simple and it's to hold ourselves together as one country, with all of our differences, with all of our different interests, with all of our different political views, simply to hold ourselves together and that was what the framers of the Constitution were about, to build a structure which was able to contain within itself all of the differences of our country. We have more differences now than we had then, but it's still our purpose, e pluribus unum, we are many and hold ourselves together as one and we seem to be falling apart as a country. We seem to be fracturing and falling apart and at each other's throats and politically so polarized and so divided and it is not healthy for America. So, I think that our ministry as faithful people is to heal, heal our country, hold ourselves together, make us, you know, in Christ we are one and to have that message as our ministry to the country, not that we're proselytizing people, but again as our message, our gift that we are ministers of reconciliation. It's a very very big deal and if it does not—this message doesn't come from religious people; I don't think it's going to come from anybody. So, I think that we have a real responsibility to America at a very difficult time for our country.

Griffith:

Well, thank you and I want to thank all our patient participants who are here with us. We can't see your faces. We look forward to seeing your faces again in future. We can see your name. So, thank you all for being here. Thanks to Provost Wendland for starting us off, Sandy Jones, Debra Kennard, and Jonathan Goldstein for helping our webinar run so smoothly, and above all, thank you Senator John Danforth and Father Matt Malone for a wonderful conversation.

Malone:

I'd like to say thank you to the Center for having me as part of this conversation and thanks to Senator Danforth. People always ask, how we're different. I say, well, he's Reverend and honorable and I'm Reverend, but not honorable. I have tremendous respect for you, Jack, and I'm blessed to be a part of this project with you.

Griffith:

Great, okay.

Danforth:

Thank you.

Griffith:

Thank you all so much and good night.

Malone:

Good night.

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