
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Respect

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Yes, I have been following the news about violence at presidential primary rallies and the fears that it's going to get worse. I realize that it's becoming even more real for you, as the campaigns move to North Carolina where you are.

The racial edge to the violence has made me think about Will Campbell.

Do you know that name?

Brother Will, as his friends called him, was a Baptist minister and social activist. He marched with Martin Luther King, rode with the Freedom Riders, and escorted the black students who integrated the Little Rock public schools. He also visited Ku Klux Klan members in jail.

His book about his life, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand what it has been like to be a Southerner.

Once, Will led a group to a prison in Kentucky to visit an inmate. After driving for more than an hour, the group was denied access to the prison, because one of them had not worn the proper shoes. When Will suggested that they be allowed in anyway, a young guard began screaming at him. "One more word out of you, and none of you will be seeing anyone here today!"

They were finally admitted, but only after they went to a nearby town and bought a new pair of shoes.

When Campbell was telling the story later, he cried. "What are we going to do about him?" he asked. People listening to the story began to think about how to punish the guard. They talked about whether to write letters to the prison warden or go to the newspaper.

But, Will was not angry. He was worried about the guard.

He saw the guard as imprisoned by his own fear and anger and was wondering about how he could have dealt differently with the guard's suffering.

In our baptismal covenant, we commit, with God's help, to "respect the dignity of every human being."

I don't know what to do exactly about the violence that is taking over our politics. It gives me a knot in my stomach.

I do know, though, that we'll have to do better than simply dehumanizing those who have dehumanized us. We'll have to

resist the temptation to reduce them to what they have done wrong or what it is about them that scares us.

And then we'll have to confront them directly, but in ways that acknowledge their humanity.

That's the hard part about respect. It often feels weak at the very moment we want to feel strong.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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