

Editorial for the Fourth: To restore America, humbly seek the greater good

June 27, 2015

Our nation celebrates its 239th birthday this week. Wave your tiny flag if you perceive the pow has gone out of the firecrackers and believe the boom has gone out of the bottlerockets. Something is wrong with America, and just about everybody senses it.

True to form, we don't agree about what that "something" is. Most people believe our nation is failing morally, but we cite different indicators of that failure.

Racism scars our national psyche

Ruminate on race, for example.



Editor Marv Knox One hundred fifty years after the Civil War and a half-century after the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights acts, racism still scars our national psyche.

Add the sacrilege of the slaughter in Charleston's Emanuel AME Church to the travesties of Baltimore, Columbus, Ferguson, Staten Island and, don't forget, McKinney. Consider that people of color still make less for doing the

same work, have a harder time getting apartments and houses, feel ever-present eyes watching them in stores and get pulled over simply for driving in the “wrong neighborhood.”

Despite protests against racism, the Confederate battle flag still flies prominently across the South. White supremacy groups flourish. Gerrymandered legislative districts distort representation. And many well-meaning white folks deny we have a problem.

An African-American sister sat next to me in a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship seminar, where we talked about race. “Blacks in America are terrorized 24 hours a day, seven days a week forever,” she said. “The systems in this country—economic, educational, judicial—were created by whites for whites. At the national level, we have to change the systems. There is no desire to do it, no will to do it, no plan to do it.”

A class divide?

Consider class, as well.

The divide between the haves and the have-nots keeps growing in America. None other than the conservative [Wall Street Journal documents the gap](#).

For example, the average wealth of the top 40 percent of wage earners increased the past two decades, while it decreased for the bottom 60 percent. Net worth of households led by people age 35 to 44 fell 54 percent. College graduates comprise the only group of Americans whose net worth rose.

And don't forget sex—as if you could.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 26 in favor of same-sex marriage. Another editorial will say more about that decision. For the purpose of this article, just watch how our nation responds to the ruling. In the days ahead,

America will be divided, with one side claiming a moral victory and the other declaring an abysmal defeat. Supporters will see either a win for civil rights or a travesty of justice. Opponents will see either a victory for righteousness or evidence of abomination.

The list of our nation's divisions seems to multiply by the month. We're divided over the environment and especially global warming, the size and efficiency of government, media, entertainment and the arts, education and energy. You could add to the list.

How we approach our problems

The common denominator seems to be how we approach our problems.

In the 21st century, we treat being American as [a zero-sum game](#). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "a situation ... in which a gain for one side entails a corresponding loss for the other side." In order for me to win, you have to lose.

Dylann Roof, the accused Charleston murderer, apparently believed in zero-sum race relations. In order for him to feel secure in his whiteness, he had to kill nine black people who welcomed him into their prayer meeting. That's just one example—an extreme, heinous example—but it reverberates throughout society. Either the police are good and the people on the street are bad, or vice-versa. Either I have civil rights, or you do. Either the folks on one side of a moral issue are right, and the others are wrong, or not.

Americans have lost our ability to fix our problems because we've lost our commitment to the greater good and our sense of humility. We don't know how to compromise, and we don't have a clue how to craft win-win scenarios.

Compromise vs. getting our own way

At the end of the latest legislative session, a first-term Texas lawmaker spoke to a radio reporter. Exasperated by the lack of progress in the Legislature, he was appalled—appalled, mind you—because he was expected to compromise in Austin. We can't get anything done because we only want our way. Meanwhile, the wheels of so much are falling off because of neglect.

Christians, of all people, should be building bridges across the chasms of our society. You remember the second-greatest commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). And you remember how Jesus defined "neighbor." He said your neighbor is the person least like you, the one you detest, your sworn enemy (Luke 10:25-37).

How would Jesus tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan today? A conservative preacher gets swept up in a flash flood and rescued by a lesbian couple? A white cop gets ambushed, and a gang-banger pulls him out? An investment banker on dialysis receives a kidney from a homeless kid?

According to Jesus, we're all neighbors. And we fail to follow him if we fail to find the common good. If we put self first and others second. If we live by the code of expediency rather than the Golden Rule.

Due to the coincidence of Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage coming down so close to the July 4 holiday, we're publishing two editorials this week. You can find the [other editorial here](#).