

Commentary: I am not going to hate you

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(RNS)—Not long ago, I stood in my front yard and did something I'd been procrastinating about for months.

I put up a yard sign.

It's a simple sign—a heart, decorated with stars and stripes, sits on a background above five simple words: "Hate has no home here." The message is repeated in five other languages—Urdu, Korean, Hebrew, Arabic and Spanish.

It's a message so simple a child could understand it—in fact, the message on the sign was [coined](#) by an elementary school student from the north side of Chicago, where all those languages are spoken.

The signs, designed by a friend who is one of the student's neighbors, went viral in 2017 during the protest over what became known as the "Muslim ban," an executive order barring entry to immigrants from a number of countries, most with Muslim majorities.

The ban was seen as an attack on immigrants—and a sign of the greater polarization in the country, where we define ourselves more and more by who we hate.

We had a similar sign in front of our place in Tennessee, in part because my friend designed them. When we moved a few years ago, the sign got lost. It took me a while to order a new one. Then the new sign sat unopened for more than a year in its package on a shelf in my office.

Why?

Because I was concerned about living up to the words on the sign, which I have begun to read differently over the past few years.

To put up that sign meant claiming that hate has no home—not just in my neighborhood but in my own home. And in my own heart.

It's one thing to reject hateful policies or actions. It is another thing to refrain altogether from hating the people behind those policies or actions—or to keep hate from driving my decisions, especially in a time when we Americans love to hate each other.

The function of hate

Hate makes so many things easier. No more trying to understand complex issues or attempting to see the world through someone else's eyes or doing the hard work of understanding other people and their points of view.

Things become simple—I am good and the people I don't like are evil. Anything I do that harms or dismisses or stands in the way of those evildoers is justified.

Let me be clear. There are trivial things I love to hate, like the New York Yankees. I was born and raised a Boston Red Sox fan. Or the fact I no longer can get a chocolate coconut donut at Dunkin'.

There are more serious things we should hate: cancer, or the harm done by sexual abuse in the church and church leaders' sometimes callous disregard. We should hate intentional and systemic injustice.

But it is all too easy to go from hating things to hating people.

"Hate makes us feel righteous," wrote social psychologists Kurt Gray and Will Blakey in an [essay](#) called "They Hate Me."

Hate gives us license to feel good being cruel to others. This righteous cruelty drives much of our political discourse today.

There are whole industries of people who sow conflict and distrust for profit or, worse, for the dopamine hits that come with going viral on social media, where hate has become our favorite cash crop.

Wise or foolish?

One of the wisest parables I know comes not from the Bible or other book of wisdom, but from an episode of “Star Trek” called “The Day of the Dove,” which debuted in November 1968.

In this episode, the crew members of the Enterprise find themselves locked in a battle for survival against their fierce rivals, the Klingons. The Klingons believe the crew of the Enterprise attacked without warning. The crew members of the Enterprise thought they were betrayed while on a mission of mercy.

As the fight rages on, each side becomes more convinced of the righteousness of its cause—and begins to accuse its enemies of atrocities that never really happened.

It turns out they all are being deceived by an alien who feeds conflict and who likes nothing more than to feast on hatred, real or imagined. And when the two crews discover the deception—that they are being used—they lay down their weapons. In doing so, they banish the alien from their presence.

“Only a fool fights in a burning house,” one of the Klingons says, in explaining why he gave up hate in that moment.

I fear, in these present days, many of us are fools fighting in a burning house.

And I do not wish to be a fool anymore.

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