

“You ain’t grown up, friend.”

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“Growing Up In America”

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O’ the things we do that we have to do even though we don’t want to have to do them. Although, I will confess my root canal was easier than my anxieties anticipated. What are some of your least favorite things? Dieting? Cleaning toilets? Installing ink cartridges in the printer? Paying taxes?

Doing what you don’t want to do but have to do because it is the right thing to do is a sign that you’re growing up. You, friend, are behaving like an adult, even when you’d rather not.

The same is true with civil courtesies, common respect. Writing thank-you notes. Thanking cashiers. Shaking the hand of the winner, admitting you lost. Drivers alternating when the highway merges into one lane so all traffic can continue to flow. Treating others how you want to be treated. Living the Golden Rule. The rule is simple, doing it is tough, particularly when not mutual. Of course, Jesus didn’t say: “When convenient.” Seminary trained us to hold the other person’s hand as tightly as they hold yours.

Colleagues have confessed apprehension about moving from their COVID inertia and isolation back into public roles. Some, especially introverts, even doubt if they are up to the challenge given how these months have changed us. There’s the excitement of society beginning to emerge, courtesy of vaccinations; there’s also a sense of dread. Colleagues say: “I shouldn’t have to feel I need a kick in the butt to get back to my responsibilities, but I do.”

At least their dread and doubt is honest and healthier than some behaviors we’ve seen lately. Why are people behaving so badly? Has COVID unleashed a breed of selfish and spoiled brats? Fans spitting on athletes. Dog-walkers neglecting to pick up their dog poop. Drivers staying in the left lane, endangering traffic (especially driving into Danville). Mowing lawns early evening when neighbors wish to enjoy their patio. Upstairs apartment dwellers demanding their right to play loud music and dance at 3 AM, then incensed when told to respect their neighbors. Sick souls with guns viewing life as prey or predator, casual malice toward police, the innocent. Bigoted, brutal officers exposed. Young men, distorted by hatreds, beating old people, while spectators watch. Sore losers choosing to cheat lest they lose again, easier than earning it. Violent and angry factions behaving like abusive boyfriends. Liars, the lies hungrily swallowed. Accusing others for your mistakes, sins, failures. Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and their colluders debasing our American flag. “Owning the libs” – is that all you got? Shameful has been members of society who contend they’ve been humiliated, so they lash out and make themselves feel superior by humiliating others.

Friend, you’re a seagull in the movie, “Finding Nemo,” them squabbling over two fish, all screaming, “Mine! Mine! Mine!” You ain’t grown up, friend.

Civilization takes effort. We Presbyterians have no illusion about humanity’s natural selfishness, hence our effort to encourage and discipline people to act unnaturally and become ferociously kind, courteous, merciful, just, honest, selfless. If you cannot like someone or what they say or what they do, you can, at least, love them.

The same is true with democracy. It takes effort. For democracy's orchard to thrive and bear fruit, it requires we the people committing ourselves to certain essential and practical principles, common goals: 1) That we the people preserve equal rights, insuring equality before the law (faithful believers add that all people are equal and beloved in the mind and heart of God); 2) That we the people guarantee impartial courts; 3) That we the people, protecting this social contract, agree to play by the same rules; 4) That we the people agree to be literate, informed, and rely on the same facts to deduce decisions; 5) That we the people refuse to tolerate corruption and shall punish those who are corrupt; 6) That we the people maintain checks and balances on power, lest power be abused, and, without check and balances, it will be. These are the six principles of patriots, our nation's working reality and promise.

Flag Day is Monday. Last week I counted ten flags displayed on my block. That's fine, so long as we realize flying the flag, hugging the flag, or pledging to the flag is hardly enough, hardly adequate respect. Only by practicing these six foundational principles of democracy do we the people honor our flag. Anything less, spits at what the flag represents.

It's time to grow up. It's not about you anyway.