

Dateline: January 23, 2011

“COME AND SIT BY MY SIDE IF YOU LOVE ME”

From the familiar cowboy love song of unknown origin,
The Red River Valley

For the last two weeks, NASA astronaut Mark Kelly has sat at the bedside of his critically wounded spouse, Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, holding her hand, as she has drifted in and out of consciousness. Recently, she has recovered sufficiently to be able to return his gesture with a faint smile and familiar pat on his cheek.

The space cowboy and the love of his life have shown us, once again, that when our length of our days have been reduced to moments of uncertainty, wavering between life and death, sometimes the only thing left to do is sit close, hang tight, and abide.

Abiding certain members of our human family is not that easy to do sometimes. Who could abide the actions of alleged shooter, Jared Lee Loughner? Consequently, he currently spends twenty three hours each day alone in a federal prison cell in Phoenix, which inmates have dubbed “the Hole.” He takes his meals through a slot in his cell door, has no contact with other prisoners, and is allowed out for only an hour a day to shower and exercise in an isolated pen with a wall around it.

For now, the only visitors permitted to visit him are his defense team and the prison chaplain, if he chooses. Neither Loughner's parents, nor anyone else have apparently tried to visit him, sources have said.

Abiding one another is not that easy to do sometimes. I should know. There are those whose words and actions I can hardly stand sometimes. Sometimes I can't abide those who don't think the way I do. Why, I wonder sometimes, can't they be as tolerant, or as enlightened as I?

Then I remind myself, there are folks in my life who not only wonder the very same thing; but with whom I couldn't disagree more on almost any topic, as well. And yet, I still count them among my friends.

I've received a number of reader's comments to last week's commentary, “Unhinged.” Many responses might be considered favorable, concurring with some of my observations and assertions. Several had their own additional thoughts to contribute to the dialogue. And at least one reader's comments expressed vehement disagreement with just about everything I had to say.

I like preaching to the choir. The harmonies blend well, and together we can appreciate what for us is an authentic voice. But I also know there are other tunes out there, and that reality suggests a broader repertoire.

So, I genuinely appreciated everyone's comments this week; but probably most of all my sharpest critic. Somehow our differences do not prevent us from still sitting down together. I love the man. We can still abide each other.

I spent many years in a pulpit, preaching more than fifty times every year to more than just the choir. While I took the responsibility and the privilege seriously, I never hesitated to express my own thoughts and opinions; as they were shaped by both a sincere journey in my own faith tradition, and my interpretation of our scriptures. I rejected outright the argument one should not mix and meddle religion with politics.

There were those who could not abide the message I had to offer sometimes. But then there were others who would listen, hang their heads in their hands, then shake my hand at

the end of the hour together, share with me their disagreements, and return the next week.

Their willingness to abide with me taught me an invaluable lesson; that mere conviction and certitude, to my way of thinking -- let alone some cold, disdainful tolerance -- were no match for mutual respect and genuine affection. Life and death moments that would periodically and unpredictably arise over the years, kept our differences in proper perspective, our pride humbled and our hearts soft.

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Five months ago, during Obama's health care reform speech to a joint session of congress, a relatively unknown member of Congress, flanked by his stunned colleagues, made a name for himself, by interrupting the President's remarks, shouting out in the House chamber, "You lie!"

On Wednesday, the *Columbia Free Times* reported that a South Carolina gun company, which had been selling parts for an AR-15 assault rifle engraved with the words "You lie" as a tribute to 2nd District Republican Congressman Joe Wilson, pulled the product from its shelves at Wilson's request. Still, it was also reported, the Palmetto State Armory's website still urged buyers to hurry, as there were only 999 copies of this item left.

In the wake of the Tucson shootings, perhaps one important lesson we might all re-learn is how we might redouble our efforts to *abide* one another. So what do I do with the words and actions of those I can't abide?

In a bookstore yesterday I saw a poster pasted near the front door. Beside two graphics depicting some pebbles and twigs were the accompanying words, "No Sticks, No Stones."

The sub-heading was an announcement for something I'd never heard of before.

On its website, "No Name-Calling Week" explains it's "an annual observance of educational activities aimed at ending name-calling of all kinds and providing schools with the tools and inspiration to launch an on-going dialogue about ways to eliminate bullying in their communities." This year the week's observance starts this Monday and runs through Friday.

My first thought was I'd always considered a week to be seven days, not five.

Then I wondered why it had to only be one short week out of a year in our lives that our children have to be the ones to teach us all to refrain from name calling.

Then I thought to myself, well what a happy coincidence No Name-Calling Week will be underway when the President delivers his State of the Union address on Tuesday.

But wait, there's more! Whereas the pomp and ceremony of the State of the Union address typically sets the stage for political theatrics, with ideological opponents sitting on opposite sides of the House chamber, half applauding while the others sit on their hands, Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer and Republican Sen. Tom Coburn, have invited one another to "come and sit by my side."

I do not know the level of affection each man holds for the other, nor do I know if biting one's tongue before speaking, or rearranging the seating chart in Washington for one evening, will help change the current course of our troubled times.

On the other hand, I am more inclined to believe that in the absence of a change of heart and such a simple gesture of good intent for our common good, a continuation of the ongoing rancor and destructive consequences of both words and actions to date have little chance of gradually and eventually changing. So I signed a petition, urging my own representatives to follow the two senator's

lead, and see if they could abide sitting on the other side of the aisle for an hour.

Fifty years ago last Friday, at the height of the Cold War, John Kennedy delivered his famous inaugural address. The black and white film footage of statesmen in top hats from a half century ago seemed as if it portrayed another time; in an era in which two super powers were engaged in the massive stockpiling of nuclear armament with a policy of deterrence that had reached its own height of lunacy, in a effort to save us all from mutual annihilation.

Then I listened to these words again, uttered by this voice from the past. Words that could have been written today, and aptly included by another President in an address to our nation this week:

So let us begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. ... And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved. All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

The cynic that sometimes finds its voice in me might simply conclude, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The idealist in me might be subjected to my critic's charge of naiveté sometimes.

And the pragmatist -- not just the optimist -- in me still opts for hope as the preferable alternative; knowing when our days are reduced to such moments of uncertainty, the heart of the matter might remind us the only (and best) thing left to do sometimes is sit close, hang tight, and abide one another.

"And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" 1 Peter 5:5

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