

Sermon Transcript  
"On Paths that Lead to Peace"  
Rev. Jeff Barz-Snell  
Delivered at First Parish Church in Weston, MA  
Sunday, September 14, 2025

So I wanna begin by thanking Nancy  
and Mike for their good words this morning, and Chet  
and Carol for their lighting.

Over the last 13  
or 14 years, this church has organized a few teams  
of mentors to work with prisoners in the Massachusetts  
Department of Correction System.

And everyone who has volunteered has found the experience  
meaningful, inspiring eyeopening.

Part of the experience of volunteering with Partakers  
is learning about the life journeys of different inmates  
and realizing how much of our lives is informed  
by the families into which we have been born.

And the consequent choices that we make part  
of growing a soul

and finding some contentment in our lives  
involves making choices both big  
and small, that are good and healthy for us.

Sometimes this is easier said than done  
and is remarkably how quickly,  
how quickly we can find ourselves heading down a wrong path.

Partakers provides programs that support incarcerated people  
in changing their ways and getting on a better path.

And it is remarkably successful as Mike

and Nancy indicated with the recidivism rate  
of inmates in the Partakers program  
being dramatically lower than those  
who are not in the program.

Nancy, Mike Carroll and Chet, Amy  
and Amy will be here on hand  
after the service if anyone wants to answer, ask questions  
or chat informally about the program.

And I think there's actually a few folks  
who volunteered previously with Partakers.

Can you raise your hand if you're here? There we go.

Say look. Madeline, Todd,

Jean, did I miss anyone else?

Ray. Oh, okay. Oh, Jane. Great.

And I think, was there, was there a gentleman named Dick  
who also participated?

No. Okay. No, not. Alright. There's plenty of people here.

So, uh, uh, to touch base with folks afterwards.

As for this morning, I wanna take a few minutes to speak  
to the events of the last week

and hopefully invite all of us to take steps  
to foster the better angels of our nature.

To use the phrase made famous by President Lincoln  
so many decades ago, I think many of us have the sense  
that people across the political spectrum would benefit from  
fostering those better angels of their nature.

Right now, and I want to do this by just taking a moment  
to point out what many of us, especially those of us

who are a little bit older, many of us sense to some degree  
that the quality and tone  
of our political discourse in this country  
has broken down into something meaner  
and problematic over the last 40 years.

By way of illustration, consider the following.

In the last few years, it has been reported  
that Ronald Reagan  
and Thomas Tip O'Neill, remember them,  
turns out they were friends at least off hours.

Re most of us remember Tip O'Neill.

He was a legendary, longtime speaker  
of the house from North Cambridge,  
who was a political nemesis for President Reagan  
during the first seven years as president.

In fact, I think Reagan danced in delight when he heard,  
when he heard news that Tip O'Neill was going to retire.

And while Reagan O'Neill Disa Reagan  
and O'Neill disagreed on almost every single major policy  
issue, they apparently nonetheless still liked each other.

They were two old Irish guys who appreciated  
one another's sense of humor.

They also shared a love of Ireland,  
which later informed the peace talks in Northern  
Ireland for several years.

They would occasionally meet for a drink  
after hours to touch base

and maintain open lines of communication.

Do you remember those old cartoons with Wiley Coyote  
and the Roadrunner and how like in some  
of the cartoons they would show up  
and punch a clock, you know, and then then become enemies  
and then they'd punch out  
and start walk away together chatting.

That's kind of what I picture it happening  
with Reagan and Tip O'Neill.

But there are others. Did you know that the well-known  
and fiercely conservative Supreme Court Justice Antonin  
 Scalia was friends with Ruth Bader Ginsburg,  
his colleague on the court.

While they had profound disagreements about the law,  
they respected one another's intelligence.

Apparently they enjoyed one another's sense of humor  
and they had a mutual love of opera.

For several years, they had seasoned opera tickets  
where they sat together.

More recently, did you know that George W. Bush  
and Laura Bush had become friendly  
with Barack and Michelle Obama?

After the Obama's left office in 2017, the Bushes  
and the Obamas became much more friendly.

Talk about a rarefied club  
where only a few people can  
really understand what you've been through.

For example, there are news reports about George Bush

and Michelle Obama warmly greeting each other  
and chatting like old friends at Jimmy  
Carter's memorial service.

It was so much noticed,  
it became like a news item for the day.

There used to be a time when our elected officials were more  
easily able to be friendly with their political opponents.

I think of Joe Biden who apparently was friendly  
with Strom Thurmond.

Uh, years ago, the controversial senator from South Carolina  
who once ran for president on the Dixiecrat ticket.

Does anyone remember Strom Thurmond

Growing up in South Carolina,

I actually met him once as a kid.

Biden apparently spoke at Thurman's memorial service  
and more recently I think of John McCain,

a Republican senator from Arizona

and Russell Feingold, a democratic senator from Wisconsin.

No one would have predicted, predicted  
that these two very different gentlemen from different  
parties in different parts of the country would actually  
like each other, but they did.

Their friendship was a notable example  
of bipartisanship in American politics, one  
that had real world implications.

Lest we forget, the two of them worked together  
for over a decade to pass landmark campaign finance reform

legislation, which became the Campaign Reform Act of 2002,  
otherwise known as the McCain Feingold Act.

And for several years this law helped  
to make political campaigns more transparent and fair.

Several of its provisions though were then discarded  
by the Supreme Court in their ruling on Citizens  
United in 2010.

But that is a story for another day.

In recognition of their work together though  
and their friendships, senators McCain  
and Feingold were awarded a joint profile  
and courage award from the Kennedy Library Museum here in  
Boston in 1999.

When McCain later ran for president, he spoke highly  
of Russell Feingold  
and Russell Feingold spoke highly of John McCain.

And when McCain died in 2018 of brain cancer,  
Russ Feingold served as one  
of the pallbearers at the funeral.

Now I go into this, this morning to remind us, remind us  
how much has changed in the last 25 years  
in American politics.

There was a time, there was a time not too long ago when  
bipartisan proposals and legislation occurred more often.

There was a time when our political leaders saw their  
opponents as colleagues with whom they disagreed  
and not not mortal enemies.

There was a time when the exchange

and the debate of ideas was encouraged.

Since democracies need that in order to function.

And as we all know, things seem to have changed.

And I don't know about you,

but I yearn, I yearn for this more congenial,

bipartisan politics of old where those

with whom we disagree are not labeled as our enemies.

I invite all of us, all of us to compare what this politics  
of old was

to what has occurred over the last few days in the wake  
of the assassination of the conservative media personality  
and organizer Charlie Kirk.

Mr. Kirk was not someone I really followed  
or listened to, but I knew who he was.

He had a following that numbered in the tens  
of millions in this country.

While I disagreed with many of Kirk's opinions and policies  
and proposals, as well as some of his methods,  
I defend defended and defend his right to speak his mind  
and engage in free in open debate.

Indeed, in some ways he reminded me as I don't know, um,  
as a little bit like William F. Buckley, if he,  
if he hadn't gone to Yale and was from Las Vegas.

Tragically, tragically,

Kirk was only 31 years old when he was killed,  
and he leaves behind a wife and two young children.

I note the reactions that occurred to the hours

after the shooting and the murder of Charlie Kirk.

Almost immediately, almost immediately, leaders  
on the right began suggesting  
that the shooter had been a left wing radical  
and perhaps more and concerningly  
before anyone had been apprehended.

On Wednesday, a Wednesday that afternoon,  
African American politicians started receiving death  
threats around the country.

And historically, black colleges  
and universities received bomb  
threats within ours.

And the reactions, the reactions  
by the four living presidents was notable as well.

Four living former presidents, I should say Bill Clinton,  
George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joe Biden,  
all expressed great dismay about the murder of Mr. Kirk  
and then called for peace and reason to prevail.

They called for a dialing back of the rhetoric that seeks  
to demean and denounce and divide all four of them.

All four of them asserted in their own way  
that political violence has no place in American politics.

And contrast that with our current president on  
Thursday morning before anyone, anyone had been apprehended  
and arrested for the murder at a time when we did not know  
anything about the shooter, the president  
of the United States did not condemn the violence  
or call for unity, or rather,



he accused his political opposition of being part  
of a radical movement who were accessories to this murder.  
He'd denounced those who would refer to him or criticize him  
and other leaders as authoritarians and Nazis,  
and asserted that this rhetoric was directly responsible  
for the terror and violence we see in this country.  
He then listed off recent violent attacks  
on himself on ice agents  
and other Republican politicians as examples of  
what he was talking about.  
He attempted to define the political violence happening at  
present as exclusively a left wing phenomenon  
by selectively naming violent incidents  
that made his allies look good  
and his enemies look bad or even worse.  
And yet we know, we know  
that nothing could be further from the truth.  
It turns out that the overwhelming majority  
of political violence in the United States is perpetrated  
by right wing men, mainly young men and groups.  
This is born out in a variety of research, including  
by division of the FBI that monitored these groups up  
until earlier this year when it was shut down.  
It's also substantiated by report  
by the Anti-Defamation League, not a liberal group.  
Mind you that published a report about right wing violence  
and the forces behind it.

In 2022, for example,

Mr. Trump did not mention the shooting that occurred just one month ago at the offices of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, where a man protesting vaccines inspired by right-wing propaganda fired over 180 shots at the building killing a police officer.

Mr. Trump also did not mention the assassination of state senate, a state senator and her husband in Minnesota in June.

This is equally outrageous and tragic as much as Charlie Kirk.

Melissa Hoffner was the Democratic caucus leader in the state senate of Minnesota.

An unstable supporter of the president's went to her home on a Saturday morning seeking her out and killed both her and her husband.

The same shooter then went to another state center's home and shot him and his wife.

But fortunately the two of them survived.

The president did also did not mention the attempted kidnapping of Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer a few years ago and the arson attack on the Penn,

Pennsylvania governor Josh Sapiro and his family Earlier this year, in the case of Governor Sapiro, a supporter of the president's set the governor's mansion on fire.

Unless we forget, there was no mention by the president

of the violent attack on the United States Capitol  
by his own supporters on January 6th, four years ago.  
Instead, those charged with attacking our capitol  
have now been pardoned.

If you are someone who believes this violent attack on the  
new US capitol was justified, I, I respectfully disagree  
and I'm happy to talk about it afterwards  
or, um, talk about it.

The people who attacked the Capitol did so  
because they believed the president's lie  
that he had won the 2020 election.

He did not. They should have been prosecuted.

The facts of the day have been well  
documented and established.

This should not be controversial to say,  
and yet I know it is.

What is clear is that our president appears to have little  
or no interest in unifying our divided country.

This is the case even when it turns out that the shooter  
of Charlie Kirk was a 22-year-old Mormon man from a  
Republican family in Utah.

It actually fell to Utah's governor on Friday to speak words  
of calm and reason to the frayed nerves of millions  
of Americans watching what had occurred  
and searching from for some solace.

Did anyone watch Spencer Cox's remarks?

I found them quite appropriate and moving.

Governor Cox discouraged the blame game  
and instead asserted this was intact on the American  
experiment and on our ideals.

He said, A violent attack like this cuts  
to the very foundation of who we are, of who we have been  
and who we can be in better times.

Freedom of expression is enshrined in our constitution  
and no American, no American should be attacked  
for expressing their views peacefully  
and in a community setting regardless  
of whether or not we agree.

Kudos to Governor Cox for dialing down the rhetoric  
and trying to bring some calm to a very tense,  
a very tense episode and situation.

This is a very challenging time in  
the history of our democracy.

There can be no doubt  
and I think all well-meaning Americans, regardless of party,  
need to be concerned about the tension  
and divisiveness that we are observing  
and experiencing in our society like the Utah Governor,  
I have some recommendations for how to manage this time  
as people of faith and citizens  
and I'd like to conclude with a few of them.

First and foremost, I've said this before, recommend it  
before and I'll probably recommend it again.

Turn off your cable news channels and go take a walk.

Trust me, it'll be okay.

Turn off your cable news channels and go outside.

Weston has hundreds of excellent walking trails.

They're fabulous. I broke up with cable news years ago  
and I have not looked back.

Yes, I occasionally catch clips,  
but I don't watch it on a regular basis.

I don't watch Fox. I don't watch CNN.

I rarely look at M-S-N-B-C.

Instead, I subscribe to reputable newspapers staffed  
by professional journalists  
and substack authors whom I trust and respect.

And I mix that with a little NPR  
and BBC since it turns out that news organizations  
can be amazingly good  
and also supported by the government around the world.

In addition, I encourage all of you to log off  
of our social media accounts for most of the day or week.  
Just log off. You can log back on.

Trust me, they'll, they'll let you go back on the network.

Some of the largest and wealthiest companies in the world  
are in the business of grabbing our attention  
and holding onto it for as long as possible.

That's their business model.

Their algorithms have learned the best way  
to keep our attention, and that is  
through fear and it is through anger.

It turns out that in arrangement, leads to engagement,

leads to profits.

While this is good, good for the bottom lines of Facebook and Twitter acts and by extension, Nvidia and Google and others, this is having a deleterious and harmful impact on our democracy.

Too many of us are being pushed towards anger and fear.

We don't need more Facebook, but rather we need more time with others in real life.

We don't need more face time, but rather we need more time with actual people, with actual faces.

So turn off the cable box. Go outside, join a club.

Join a, join an engaging religious community.

I happen to know one right nearby.

Second, even as I say this, I think we need to name and understand the voices and groups that seek to divide people in this country.

Christian nationalism, the belief that this nation was founded by white Christian evangelicals and needs to be ruled by white Christian evangelicals is an influential ideology in the United States in 2025.

Charlie Kirk was actually a big proponent of this ideology and several senior officials in the current administration are as well, including Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of Defense and Russell Vought.

Those of us who read the Bible with reason and who are inspired by the life

and teachings of Jesus need to stand up  
and oppose this movement thoughtfully, compassionately,  
uh, and um, spiritually.

Instead of vanquishing our enemies, we need to find ways  
to foster understanding  
and create opportunities for everyone.

And we need to be aware of those who use the Bible  
to sow seeds of division and hatred and name it.

Third, we cannot lose sight of the importance of truth  
and common understanding in a functioning democracy.

We are a wash in a series of claims  
and assertions by our senior leaders  
that are simply not true.

We are told that we must round up most immigrants since most  
of them are criminals.

When it turns out that the opposite of is true,  
immigrants are actually more law abiding than those  
who are were born here in the United States.

Should those who are violent and criminal be routed up  
and deported, absolutely.

But what is occurring at present is far, far beyond that.

While I believe that we need to update our immigration laws  
and regulations, I think we can do better than  
what is transpiring at present.

The truth matters  
and we need to defend what we know is common sense and true.  
We need to defend the common sense understanding

that vaccines are good for populations

that keep sickness at bay.

We need to acknowledge the reality of climate change

and the deleterious effects it's having on our, on our,

our environment, and our world.

We need to acknowledge who is behind most

of the political violence in this country.

Finally, we need to remind ourselves of the real Christian

and Jewish teachings that matter,

that all people are made in the image of God

and should be treated with some portion of respect

and decency, citizen and immigrant alike.

Our scripture tells us

to treat the foreigner in our midst the same

as we would treat a native born.

That would be Leviticus 19.

And it reminds us to beware of false pronouncements

of kings and rulers.

It warns us against the temptation to follow the dictates

of a scurrilous ruler

and lose sight of the values of the one true God.

We heard in our reading this morning such a warning,

an ancient warning, the Bible's full of stories

of people responding to the demands

of corrupt kings and officials.

It turns out that rulers,

dishonorable rulers have existed down through the ages.

Hence, there are warnings about not getting caught up



in their agenda and forgetting about the values  
and the agendas of the one true living God.

We heard read in Psalm 146, the ancient warning,  
do not put your trust in princes in mortals in  
whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth.

On that very day, their plans cease  
and perish happy.

Are they happy?

Are they whose help is the God  
of Jacob whose hope is in the Lord their God,  
who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food  
to the hungry, who sets the prisoners free?

Who opens the eyes of the blind, who lifts up those  
who are bowed down, who loves the righteous,  
who watches over the strangers who upholds the orphans  
and the widow happy?

Are those who remember those more ancient  
and perennial values?

These are the words of someone who has endured a time  
of darkness only to be reminded of  
what is most important in this life and in this world.

These are the words of a people who are recommitting to  
what is most important in a life of faith.

And that would be doing unto others  
as you would have them do unto you.

I believe that what unites Americans is so much greater

and more important than what divides us as a nation.

As we see these ongoing attempts to sow division

and hatred, we need to step back

and ask ourselves, who is benefiting?

Who is benefiting from this agenda?

I believe we can be a better nation

and we can be a better people.

And this is a belief that goes right back

to the Puritan founders of this church.

And I believe that the democratic process requires

that people engage with one another fairly honestly,

and with some portion of mutual respect.

How could we summon that yet again?

I will conclude with the full quote of President Lincoln's

that I started with this morning.

They're the final lines of his inaugural address from 1861,

just as our country was splitting apart for a civil war

and they suddenly seemed timely.

Oh, so timely again.

Lincoln said, I am loathed to close.

We are not enemies, but friends.

We must not be enemies.

Though passion may have strained it,

but though passion may have strained,

it must not break our bonds of affection.

The mystic cords of memory stretching from every battlefield

and patriot grave to every living heart

and Hearthstone all over this broad land, will

yet swell the chorus of this nation  
when touched again, as surely they will be  
by the better angels of our nature.  
I pray that we will be open, open to those impulses,  
towards benevolence and compassion  
and understanding in the days and months ahead.  
Amen.