

Those of you who have either read Richard Haase's *Bill of Obligations*, or watched the full PBS series, might realize that we have tweaked the 10th Habit of Good Citizenship. In Haase's work, it is "Put Country First." I suspect many of you can understand how this could be a problematic title, especially in this space. Throughout these 10 weeks, we have been like bees leaving a hive, and exploring the various ways we can tend to the Common Good. As we've observed each of the 10 Habits, we, as people of faith, always return home to the words of Deuteronomy 6.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

This is the law Jesus proclaimed as our truth. Of course, he added onto it to include that part of loving God is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This is our focus and drive as people living in this world. We cannot ever be lured into believing that above all we put country first.

We explored the dangers of putting country before God on the day that we focused on "Teaching Civics," and I shared with you information about the faithful Christians during the rise of Nazism who countered the message of the Nationalistic "German Christians" and put their names on a statement of faith called the Barmen Declaration. Many became martyrs because of their actions. And as we see a rise in Christian Nationalism in our country, we wanted to be very clear where we pledge our allegiance.

The reading Donna just offered from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us that unfortunately there is a need generation after generation for people to stand up

in the halls of power and bear witness to fidelity in God alone. In this text, it is Jewish leaders who bring in some of Jesus' Apostles to the religious Council to reprimand them for preaching and healing in Jesus' name. Apparently they are so caught up in partisan religiosity that they are unable to discern the truth of the Apostles' witness. It is such a threat to their own basis of power that they allow themselves to treat the Apostles with disdain. It's rather ironic, I suppose, that when the central tenet of the faith was "Put Adonai First," the religious leaders had fallen into protecting their various sects – Sadducees, Pharisees, and the like – rather than open themselves to the way that Adonai had become transcendent in the world.

Alas, the world hasn't changed so much. I will admit that I have taken Richard Haase's premise somewhat out of context. What he meant when saying one of the habits of healthy citizenship is "Putting Country First," is that we should forsake partisan politics for the wellbeing of the whole country. We have gotten so caught up in supporting Red or Blue, or as is the case now, pro- or anti- one particular demagogical figure, that we've made it extremely difficult to hold civil conversations without them escalating rapidly. We've gotten so used to needing to hold our political ground that we've forgotten to do what is best for the whole of the nation. As the young woman said in the video, "We all want to live better, we all want to feel better ... we all want for people around us to be healthy, to be thriving, ... to live." Haase's point is that for all of us to be doing this, we need to put the well-being of the country first, and to row in the same direction.

It seems that will be the salvation of the nation. As Haase says in the video,

American democracy is not gonna be protected or preserved or saved by some individual coming on the political scene who's gonna wave a magic wand and somehow say, "Okay;" say and do things and then American democracy will be fine for another 250 years.

It doesn't work that way.

It's gonna be protected and preserved and saved because hundreds of millions of Americans are gonna do the right thing.

Then he takes us through some of his list of Healthy Habits:

- They're going to push back against violence.
- They're gonna get involved.
- They're gonna get informed.
- They're gonna look out for the common good.
- They're gonna ask that civics be taught in our schools.
- They're gonna support programs of public service.

And that's the way this democracy has evolved over the centuries.

And that's the way it's gonna last and do well for centuries to come.

And I think that is the hope – that Americans will inform themselves and find their voices, and act for the benefit of the country as a whole.

But we have to also understand that we aren't just citizens of the United States of America. We are citizens of the Earth. We are part of an extremely fragile web of interconnectedness, and we have to, as the well-worn saying goes, Think Globally and Act Locally.

Therefore, we decided to pivot away from the idea of “Putting the Country First” and place our focus on “Respecting the Earth and One Another.” Next week we will be embarking on the month-long Season of Creation. It is a natural segue from these 10 habits of healthy citizens, to concentrating on healthy habits of being global creatures with the rest of those for whom God cares around, in and over this orb on which we live. As the month progresses, we will work on creating for ourselves the habits we need to make as part of our natural interface with those around us.

I love the line in Deuteronomy in which God instructs the faithful to “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” If we are truly able to internalize respect for the Earth and for one another we will be able to do none other than to figure out how to act in the best interest of all of life.

Today’s guest speaker is the perfect choice to stand on the threshold of the Season of Creation, because as you will hear, she will share how in her own life she was convicted to change the way she lived in order to honor the planet that is our home, but by acting as a steward of her local community. And just as Richard Haase reminded us, it is going to take hundreds of millions of (citizens) to do the right thing” to turn this world around, and we all need a little inspiration. And we all need to realize just how much we need one another to get things done.

However, before I turn it over to Catalina Maddox-Wagers, I want to whet our appetite for the coming Season of Creation through a litany that Barb Holtz shared with me this week, written by Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her creation care anthem, “Braiding Sweetgrass.” It is an approach to regarding and respecting all

life on this planet that sustains us. One might say it is a call to being mindful about our mutual relationship with life. {Picture in your mind plants, animals, water, and fossil fuels/ores.} Kimmerer titled it THE HONORABLE HARVEST:

Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.

Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.

Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last.

Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

Never take more than half. Leave some for others.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.

Share.

Give thanks for what you have been given.

Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.

Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.

And to that I respond, Thanks be to God.

Catalina Maddox-Wagers immigrated to the United States in 1985 to pursue a degree in Business Administration. Her career spanned leadership and C-suite positions in various cities nationwide, where she honed her ability to lead high-performing teams and drive strategic initiatives.

In 2018, Catalina transitioned from the corporate world to focus her expertise on advancing Northeast Ohio and the residents of her adopted city, Cleveland. With

a passion for social justice and environmental protection, she applies her leadership skills to create meaningful change. She is the co-founder of the Cleveland Heights Green Team, a grassroots organization dedicated to fostering community collaboration and promoting sustainable practices that reduce carbon footprints and encourage hyperlocal environmental stewardship. In addition, she serves as Board Secretary and an Equity Committee member at Collaborate Cleveland, an organization committed to ensuring equitable access to opportunities for underserved and marginalized communities.

Catalina also serves as Co-Chair of the Climate and Environmental Sustainability Committee for the City of Cleveland Heights, where she helps shape policies that advance climate action, resource conservation, and urban sustainability.

She is a member of the Cleveland Leadership Center and has contributed to HOLA Ohio as a Board Member. At Esperanza Inc., she has served as both a mentor to immigrant students of Hispanic descent and a member of the Programs Committee.

Her journey from corporate leadership to advocacy reflects her belief that true leadership is about service—creating a more equitable, sustainable future. She remains dedicated to integrating environmental protection, social equity, and gender justice, using her experience to lead initiatives that empower communities and individuals alike.

Welcome, Catalina!