

The Least of My Brethren

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." [Matthew 25:40]

The two dirtiest political campaigns I've ever witnessed have been the two between Steve Kagan and John Gard. Neither candidate has been particularly truthful or honest, neither has shown any particular sign of ethics or integrity, and both appeared willing to say or do anything to win the election. Of the two however, Gard's consistently been the smarmier; the best I can say for Steve Kagan is that he's at least not John Gard.

One of Gard's TV ads particularly bothered me. After pointing out that Kagan had voted to "raise your taxes by \$1800" – the kind of gross factual distortion that typified the campaign – Gard then stated that Kagan had "voted to give illegal aliens taxpayer funded healthcare, and housing". More exactly, Kagan had voted against provisions that made illegal aliens ineligible for Medicare, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, and Section 8 rental housing assistance. And then came the sound bite, as Gard asked Kagan "What about the word 'illegal' don't you understand?"

Republicans like to portray themselves as the party of religion, morals, and family values, and the Democrats as philandering atheists. Which is OK, until they actually start believing their own press releases. The problem with being too certain about one's own moral superiority is that it often leads to smugness and self righteousness.

And once you know with absolute certitude that you're a member of the preordained chosen, it becomes awful easy to treat with scorn all those sinners around you. Consider the actions of Al Qaida, or the religious zealots that attacked Mumbai, or the groups that bombed abortion clinic in the 1990s, or that strange Kansas group that protested at military funerals a few years ago. All of them were sure they were doing God's will. It's amazing how much evil you can perpetrate when you're absolutely sure you're doing good.

It was with a smug, self satisfied smile that Gard posed that question about "illegal". Those people after all, the ones Kagan voted to make eligible for health insurance, came here illegally, sneaking across the border in the dark of night, slipping quietly into the Land of Opportunity to try to make a better life for themselves and their families. How dare they, the dirty lawbreakers.

Just because they're the ones who harvest our crops, and prepare our meals; just because they're the ones who repair our roofs and clean our hotel rooms; just because they pay taxes too, both income and social security taxes withheld from their paychecks, and sales taxes on their purchases, and property taxes through the rent they pay – well, none of that gives them the right to housing assistance or healthcare. Or so Gard smugly implies.

Well, maybe they don't deserve anything from you or me. Maybe if they're hungry, they don't deserve to have us give them something to eat. (Actually not much of a problem – when the jobs dried up this fall, a lot of them went back south of the border.) Maybe if they're sick, they don't deserve to have us give them health care. Maybe if their housing is inadequate, they don't deserve our assistance.

But I don't remember Jesus making an exception about "illegals". I don't remember him saying anything about the most deserving of our brethren. No, I'm pretty sure that his statement was all encompassing, all skin tones, all passports, all tongues. So John Gard, what about the phrase "least of these my brethren" don't you understand?