

Name-calling and Ivory soap

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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Name-calling and “cussin’” were bad things my grandparents, parents, and teachers told me not to do. My grandmother Ada once took a chunk of Ivory soap (“99 44/100 pure”!) in her hand, held it less than a half-inch from my lips, and threatened to wash my mouth out with it if I said one more thing less pure than the soap.

There’ve been times this political season when I’ve imagined how much fun it would be to see Ada apply her remedy for bad speech to political candidates.

I’m not naïve about politics. After all, I served Baptist congregations for nearly four decades. Politics—small “p” politics—are everywhere. Debate, argument, disagreement, conflict, and, hopefully, compromise are all part of moving “polities” of every kind toward the common good.

I know that “going negative,” *ad hominem* arguments, and scapegoating aren’t new with this wearisome presidential campaign and aren’t unique to electoral politics. Still, nearly every day, I say to myself something like Isaiah said in the 8th century BCE: “I’m undone. I’m a person of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips.”

Our words are frequently nasty and deplorable, and they have corrosive effects. They erode our awareness that even the people who are most offensive to us are created in God’s image. God loves and cherishes them—us—all.

I confess that, too-often, I can’t see the image of the divine in the people with whom I struggle or feel love for people who threaten what I value or cherish people who don’t seem to care about the things which are dearest to me. I also admit that I sometimes can’t see the image of God in myself, a blindness which shutters and shadows my perceptions of others.

Psalms 8 says that God has “crowned human beings with glory and honor,” a claim it’s important to hear amid all the blistering accusations and demeaning rhetoric of these disheartening days.

No matter how ashen and faded we see ourselves and each other, in God's gaze, we shine with original splendor. In the light of that transforming vision, we gradually learn to trust that we and everyone else will at last become what God already and always sees: children of bright and wonder, freed from fear, gladly and abundantly alive.

We greet each other with mercy rather than scorn.

We meet each other with a determination to understand instead of an impulse to reject.

We treat each other with the awareness that, for all our differences, we live in one world and in One Love.

Until I learn these things more fully, I keep in mind Ada's bar of Ivory Soap, as well as the smoldering coal with which God purified Isaiah's lips.

I can at least clean-up my speech while I wait for love more fully to create in me a clean heart.

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