INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Rights and responsibilities. How does one act?

Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU*

"Is it my responsibility to speak?" is a better question than "Is it my right to speak?" So wrote Justin Meyers in a recent Facebook blog. Meyers is a minister in the Reformed Church in America who serves as the associate director of the Al Amana Center in the country of Oman, an interfaith center in this Muslim country in the Middle East. He is also a graduate of Grand Valley State University before going to seminary to pursue his theological education.

In his post, Meyers was sharing what he called "one of the most important shifts in my life," when a seminary professor encouraged him to think more about responsibility than about one's rights. Of course, rights are important in a free society, but the issue is "how and when we claim these rights."

Meyers continues, "Rights are self-focused, responsibility is community focused." He then applies it to our situation today by posing the following questions:

1. Is it responsible to go out?
2. What ways can I responsibly speak out for those who are suffering?
3. Are there ways I can make my point in responsible ways that won't cause more harm?
4. Is what I am doing going to benefit others who aren't me (and my "tribe") and those who are unable to be heard?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks made a similar point in a recent BBC interview.

The former chief rabbi of Great Britain said, "We've had too much individualism ... and too little concern for the collective of the nation and for humanity as a whole. We have talked far too much about rights and far too little about responsibilities. ... Without responsibilities, in the end, you find you have no rights."

Sacks is quick to point out the true heroes who have acted including the "doctors, nurses, responders and the public accepting the responsibility." He is also positive about what can emerge from this shared experience, noting, "There is something within us, as social animals, that makes us feel better when we are altruistic, when we help others, when we make their life better. ... We will come through it with a much stronger identification with others."

Last week, we honored those brave members of our society who actually gave their lives to protect our liberty and freedom. I watched a Memorial Day video tribute that included the playing of "Amazing Grace" on bagpipes and showing scenes of brave soldiers, many of whom gave their lives for our freedom. That freedom, of course, includes our rights, but I shudder to think that what it is about for some is the freedom to endanger the health of others by my behavior, or the freedom to bully someone with whom I disagree. Our rights and freedoms we consider to be sacred, but let us not squander them on trivial matters of selfish behavior.

An early champion of freedom was the English philosopher John Stuart Mill in his 1859 essay "On Liberty." Mill defined liberty as living "one's own life in one's own way." But in a recent essay, University of Chicago Professor of Theological Ethics William Schweiker notes that Mill recognizes a "rightful boundary to one's liberty." He writes that Mill calls it the "harm principle — my liberty goes only so far as it does no harm to others ... and that liberty without boundaries is chaos or war."

Schweiker, reflecting on our situation today writes, "Competing notions of liberty in our nation are routinely divided and named: blue versus red states; right versus left; ... liberal versus conservative; journalism versus fake news, and on and on. Each side accuses the other of causing (and exacerbating) the division; all while each side believes itself to represent the true spirit of the nation. But as Lincoln rightly noted — citing Scripture — a house divided cannot stand. As it was in his time, so, too, is it in ours."

But what is the role of religion in our currently divided situation? Schweiker responds, "Whether it is the Exodus and Sinai, and so the giving of law for a life in freedom, or the so-called Golden Rule, the teachings of Jesus, the holy Qur'an or the Buddha's middle way, the religions have sought to hold in tension freedom and liberation with a rightful submission to the law of other-regard."

In this week's Christian Century, editor/publisher Peter W. Marty affirms the importance of rights, but asks, "If I see my life primarily as a prepackaged set of guaranteed rights owed me, instead of as a gift of God, what motivation is there to feel deep obligation toward society's most vulnerable? If I'm just receiving what's my rightful due, why would I ever need to express gratitude? What's the point of looking outward toward others if I'm chiefly responsible for looking inward and securing the personal rights that are mine?"

Rabbi Sacks is actually quite hopeful that our current crisis will bring us together for the common good for all of humanity. In his interview he continues, "We're coming through this feeling a much stronger sense of identification with others, a much stronger commitment to helping others. This, in a tragic way, is probably the lesson we needed as a nation and as a world."

Richard Rohr, a widely recognized ecumenical teacher, Christian mystic and Franciscan monk, also sees our current situation as an opportunity. He wrote, "If God wanted us to experience global solidarity, I can't think of a better way. We all have access to this suffering, and it bypasses race, gender, religion and nation." He calls it a "highly teachable moment."

It is up to each of us to weigh carefully our responsibilities in our current situation against the desires for a kind of freedom that could bring harm to others. It involves not only what it means to be a good citizen, but also what our faith commitments require of us.

interfaith@gvsu.edu