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I tell my students that in Christian theology suffering matters greatly. This is not because we want to glorify suffering or because we believe in a punitive or masochistic God. I give three essential reasons for making the suffering of peoples a privileged place from which to do theology.

First, it is a universal experience. Every human being is guaranteed some suffering in their life, some profound, a lot unjust and undeserved, some easily addressed, some absolutely irredeemable. But suffering is guaranteed as part of the human condition.

Second, it is authentic. Suffering is that place where we can't help but be our truest selves. Contrary to posing for selfies at parties or perfect early morning workouts — too often the fake stuff of social media — suffering finds us naked and vulnerable in the face of a broken body, a broken heart, a broken soul, a broken mind.

Finally, human suffering connects with the central claim of the Christian faith: that Jesus Christ, God made human, suffered a cruel and unjust death on the cross.

In the post-presidential election chatter, much has been said about whether we can approach and work with, let alone reconcile with or embrace people who find themselves radically opposed to one's political position. This is complicated by the often-justified understanding that someone else's political position actually represented direct violence to one's integrity and human dignity, or that of entire groups of people.

To be more precise, as a Joe Biden supporter who considers many of President Donald Trump's policies as violent toward members of the LGBTQ+ group, indigenous folks, immigrants, African Americans, and those with medical vulnerabilities, I have wondered how I would be able to come close to having a conversation with someone who continues to support Trump and his policies. This is a question I have posed to many audiences in the past: How am I to love the bearer of an unlovable idea?

Most recently, I asked that question while listening to interviews of Trump supporters still in disbelief about the election results. My answer was both immediate and instinctual: I'll meet you at the cross.

I imagined that these persons, like all humanity, have experienced profound suffering in their lives. I imagined myself encountering them at an Al-Anon group, or a support group for parents of children who have died by suicide, or at the funeral of a beloved relative or friend. If I truly believe that the cross of Christ is of universal significance (and I do), I also must believe that grief binds our humanity.

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This is the place where our first words of encounter must always be "I am so sorry you are going through this. How are you doing right now?" In that place, politics and injustice don't necessarily melt away, but they take a step back — opening space for our shared vulnerability.

Encountering the other in spaces of shared vulnerability is not rapprochement. It is not the healing of political rifts sometimes too deep to make any sense of, or even opening spaces to begin to cooperate or collaborate. It certainly does not repair injustices, or even suggest that there will be ongoing or future moments of friendship based on shared goals for the common good. These are some of the elements that Pope Francis suggest could be the fruits of a "culture of encounter" when applied to political and civil life in his most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*.

My proposal is much humbler and much more vulnerable than that. It is the acknowledgment that human suffering and moments of shared vulnerability could open our humanity to the kind of brief yet necessary encounter that tells us that our political opponent is also human, yes, even loveable. I acknowledge that "suffering" is a category that is fraught with inequities, often bearing the marks of the injustices tied to its causes. It is not the same socially, culturally or politically to lose a child that dies serving the armed forces, for example, as to lose a child to police violence. Not all suffering is equal, but all suffering is human, and very real.

More importantly, I acknowledge that my own humanity is tied to how I respond to the suffering of others, and on this Francis and I agree: "Sooner or later, we will all encounter a person who is suffering" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 69).

A number of Trump supporters have encountered me in my suffering, have sat down with me and expressed that simple sign of co-humanity: "I am so sorry you are going through this. How are you doing right now?" I know that they will do it again as surely as I know that I am human because I suffer. They meet me at my cross. And I will meet them at theirs.

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This story appears in the **Election 2020** and **Theology en la Plaza** feature series.