How then shall we live? The events of the past week have given us much upon which to reflect. Two funerals, very different, but both in honour and respect of two remarkable people: Senator John McCain, a statesman and war hero, and Aretha Franklin, dubbed the Queen of Soul.

In the midst of this, two other events: the revelation of the extent of abuse of children in the Roman Catholic church, and the breakfast in the White House for evangelical pastors, and church leaders. They were warned that if they didn’t get out the vote, there would be violence in the streets. Those same pastors did not walk out in disgust at this perversion of the word of God, but congratulated the president for his support. An evangelical writer, Susan Wright, said that church leaders are “turning a blind eye then to faith, in order to gain access to political power.” (Patheos.com 8/15/18.) Another evangelical, Sarah Thebarge, wrote The Ends Don’t Justify the Means in which she wrote, “Using God to justify an ungodly choice is a heart-level spirituality that belies an ugly truth.” (Patheos.com, 8/29/18.)

Aretha’s son Edward may have said it best, in his musical tribute to his mother: Mercy, mercy, mercy me, things ain’t what they used to be. We are on the precipice of an historical moment. Do we choose goodness, or power?

So many people spoke of Aretha’s goodness. She would pay for the groceries of someone else in line. Her personal assistant was known to deliver envelopes of cash to people in need. She cared for her home city of Detroit, and walked its streets and shopped in its stores. Everything she did, she did with her whole soul, and for this reason she is called the Queen of Soul. It is her goodness that will be remembered.

Almost 200 years ago, a French diplomat, Alexis de Tocqueville, remarked, “America is great because she is good. If she ceases to be good, she will no longer be great.” (From Brian Epperly, Patheos.com, 8/26/18.) At her father’s funeral, Meghan McCain said that in her father’s America,
there is no need to make America great again, because America is already great. McCain chose two former Presidents to deliver his eulogy, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. They were both political opponents, but their admiration for McCain was obvious in their eulogies. America is at a turning point, of choosing political ambition, or the good of the nation.

The Israelites were at such a point when they had reached Mount Pisgah, where they could see the land of Canaan. (Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9.) They are at a turning point. They have been a wandering, tribal people. They have displaced nations in their path. They have just defeated the land of King Sihon, and of King Og and in doing so they have killed every man, woman, and child. The history of Israel is steeped in blood.

But God told Moses that he would not reach this land. Instead, Joshua would lead them across the Jordan.

Moses takes this as an opportunity to tell the people the importance of how they shall live in this new land. Moses tells them that in observance of the law, they will become such a great nation that they will be admired by other peoples. They will overcome their enemies through wisdom and discernment. They will live by faith.

Living by faith isn’t easy. It requires a commitment to a standard of living that for most of us will be impossible. But we don’t need to be perfect, just good. Only God is perfect, and forgives us our imperfections.

The letter of the apostle James, who may have been Jesus’ brother, is full of instruction to the new community on how to live. (James 1:17-27.) A lot of people don’t like the letter of James, for different reasons. The evangelicals and the Lutherans don’t like it because it emphasizes works as a path to salvation. Catholics don’t like it because it doesn’t mention grace.

But I prefer to see in James a response to grace, and works as a result of salvation. James teaches a way of living, first by controlling the self. Only then can you become “doers of the word, and not merely hearers,” (James
1:22.) What you believe is as important as how you speak, how you act, and how you treat others, especially those who are less privileged than you.

How then shall we live? The church has a role to speak truth to power. But when the church seeks to justify its own power, the result can be horrific. Over 800 cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Philadelphia. It’s easy to target the Roman Catholic Church because of its insistence on a celibate priesthood, which some believe invites abusers and pedophiles. (Hemant Mehta, patheos.com, 8/29/18.) But the church is not alone in this. There are reports of widespread abuse among Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses, Brethren, Sikhism, Buddhism, Christian Brothers, and ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups.

In the state of Utah, there is an opioid crisis. This seems strange since there are so many Mormons there who don’t even drink coffee. But many Mormons have said that when they become addicted, they have nowhere to turn because of the shame they would bring on themselves and their families. They have not attained perfection.

These religious groups share one thing. Power over others. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

One Catholic writer, Morgan Guyton, says “So it’s time for Catholics to discern what a holistic, non-patriarchal sexuality could look like.” (patheos.com, 8/29/18).

It’s not just the Roman Catholic Church that needs to search its conscience. How then shall we live? In our own community there was a sign promoting hate. It has been taken down, and some people feel that this is a victory. But unless a new voice rises up to advocate for love, nothing has been gained. Last week I participated in the making of a new video, called #SIGNSOFLOVE. It’s on Facebook and Twitter. Everyone spoke about the need for love, in our lives and in our community. It’s time.
Choose love. Love is love. God is love. Choose to be good, not perfect. God is with us, the Holy Spirit lives in us, and Jesus goes before us. How then shall we live? We live by faith, and faith leads us to love. May we make it so. Amen.