

Homily – The Common Good and the Kingdom of God

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More and more often it feels like we are coming apart. Each day I read several online newspapers, so I still know what is going on in the world. But, I have stopped watching the news. I find it to be too painful. I don't think things are worse than they used to be, I think we are just much more aware of what is going on in the world. All of this political stuff in Washington, all of this negativity, it is not new. People have always jockeyed for power and worked to get their name at the top of the heap. The political stuff is not new, but somehow the malaise has bled over into our emotional and spiritual lives. Personally, I continue to be an optimist. Maybe it is because of the great leap forward we have taken around gender and LBGT issues. There is still work to be done to appreciate and celebrate the great diversity of human beings that has been created by God. Still I am optimistic that things are going to keep getting better. But, the emotional disdain we seem to have for one another has just caused me to stop watching the news. Love of neighbor is so central to our souls, and when this becomes difficult then it is like a big alarm bell ringing to say that our churches better get busy so that we can have healing.

Last week I spoke about love, and I made the bold statement that is really not very bold for most of us, God is love. God loves us and we respond to God's love in three ways – by loving God back, by loving others because God loves them, and by loving ourselves because we are the beloved of God. Last week I shared how important it is to love ourselves because when we don't it is hard to love God and others. So, keep up the good work of loving yourself. However, this week I want to focus on loving others.

Part of the ethos of twenty-first century America is rugged individualism. Many want to be beholden to none, and certainly never controlled by another person. Self-determination is a central part of our culture, or at least the perception of self-determination. Capitalism and America are almost synonymous in most parts of the world, and capitalism is based on the prime motivator of self-interest. We work hard so that we can play hard and have more stuff. Again healthy love of self is important but when the ego and false-self take over, then our spirits are in trouble.

I've shared this before but about twenty years ago, the most frequently requested song for funerals and memorials was Frank Sinatra's song "My Way." Many want to be remembered for being in control and making a path through life that was by their own rules. As followers of Jesus I think there is something very sad about all this me, me, me stuff. Yes, healthy love of self is important, but the pendulum has swung way

too far to the side of independence and we have forgotten about the importance of the common good.

God has created us to be in healthy relationship with other people. We are social creatures, and our life together can be better. It is time for us to reclaim the neglected common good. We need to learn how faith might help, instead of hurt, in this important task. Our public life could be made better, even transformed or healed, if we practiced what we preached in our personal lives; in our families' decisions; in our work and vocations; in the ministry of our churches; and in our collective witness to the wider world. In all these ways we can put the faith community's influence at the service of this radical neighbor-love ethic that is both faithful to God and the common good. Remember, a robust commitment to the common good dates to the very beginnings of our faith. It is rooted in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew scriptures call readers to look beyond their own self-interest. We are to create just and healthy communities. And, the Gospels teach us to love God with all of our heart, mind, and soul, *and* to love our neighbors as ourselves.

It's time to hear and heed a call to a different way of life. Let's reclaim this very old idea called the common good. Two thousand years ago Jesus issued that call and announced the kingdom of God—a new order of living in sharp contrast to all the political and religious kingdoms of the world. That better way of life was meant to benefit not only his followers but everybody else too. The common good is a central component of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is for all and not just for a chosen few.

Now, in today's Gospel we have a story that is traditionally called the widow's mite. A mite is a coin, and the widow put two of these coins, amounting to all of her wealth, into the synagogue collection box. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus holds up this widow as an example for the rest of us. Traditionally, this Bible reading has been used to encourage us all to give more. Keep that in mind for in 10-15 minutes we will be turning in our pledge cards. Be that as it may, I want to take a step back in our Gospel reading and look at what was happening in the synagogue that day. Notice that Jesus is watching both the rich and the poor give money to the synagogue. Two thousand years ago the social safety net for the widow, the orphan, and the poor was usually their family or the synagogue. So the money being put into the collection box was for the common good. Today, much more of the common good is provided by our governments, but our faith communities also provide some of our common good. Two thousand years ago, the common good provide by the government was limited, and today's Gospel reading shows the people's financial support for the main avenue of common good, the synagogue. With today's Gospel reading we see the support Jesus has for this good work. Again, I believe that Jesus lifts up the common good as a

key component of the kingdom of God and as an antidote to the individualism of the false self.

For you see, the common good tells a story that goes beyond you. It affirms everyone, and allows each individual to freely fulfill their own part and purpose. With the common good we are each called into God's creative plan to overcome the dominance of the self, and at the same time to value our fellow human beings. But, how do we bring about this common good?

For a just and peaceful society to flourish, people with different opinions and backgrounds need to get outside of our bubbles and meet each other, which means we also need to deliberate and negotiate. We don't have to agree on everything or even be friends, but we do need bonds, to recognize our common humanity and resist forces that drive us apart. Conversation is the starting point for building common ground. The common good encourages and builds social relationships and mutual obligations across our different backgrounds and opinions. The common good is not utopian or even about perfection. It can be messy, but when we live into the common good then our spirits begin to soar and our emotional malaise begins to fall away.

One other note about the common good. It connects us to our ancestors who have gone before us and to those who will come after. Global climate change is making it painfully obvious that there are negative effects when we ignore our common destiny. We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received from our ancestors also belongs to those who will follow us.

And, all of this common good stuff is made easier when we see Christ in all. God is stamped into all people and into all of creation. With this insight we are called to love and respect all. Seeing Christ in all is an act of faith. It is an act of hope. It is an act of love which snowballs and causes others to respond in love. This would be big news.

May we be a church that helps you see Christ around you. May we be a people who share our love. May you find ways to build the common good and God's kingdom here on this earth.