

January 16, 2022

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1 Corinthians 12:1-11 (MLK)      “The Common Good”

Today, I want to reflect for a few minutes on a topic the Apostle Paul mentions: the common good. The common good is a notion that has played a big role in American history. James Madison, the founding father and fourth US president wrote, “The public good and real welfare of the great body of the people, is the supreme object to be pursued.” That is to say the ultimate goal is not my personal good, but the public good; not the welfare of me and mine, but the welfare of us and ours.

The common good was clearly the impetus for the Constitution of the United States of America. The preamble begins: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity...”

Until 1820, when the state of Maine flipped it’s Facebook status to single, we were in a relationship, we were a province of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The word weal means “prosperity and happiness.” Therefore, the “commonweal” or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, refers to the value of widespread prosperity.

There are some who fear that, in America, the common good is no longer valued like it once was. One such person is former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who came out with a book on the topic. He argues that Americans have gotten into the habit of looking out for number one at a cost to overall economic and political well-being. He claims we have lost our sense of connectedness, to one another and to larger ideals. In his words, if there is no common good, there is no society.

I would submit, if there is no common good, there is no community. There’s no church. There is no family. When the Apostle

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he addressed these kinds of concerns. There was schism in the church. There were class divisions. Some were putting their own interests above that of the community. There was an assumption that certain gifts and abilities were more important than others.

In order to counter all of this, Paul wrote, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” In other words, Paul believed the Holy Spirit bestowed abilities, competencies, and skills on each person. From one Spirit, came many different gifts. Some are listed in today’s reading: the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, and the discernment of spirits.

For Paul, class division, the assumption that some people were more important than others, and the ranking of spiritual gifts was not acceptable. In fact, Paul’s preferred metaphor for the church seemed to be that of the body. In the body, there are different organs and systems with particular functions, but they’re all important. They’re all necessary for the well-being of the whole.

Without the lungs, the heart can’t pump oxygenated blood to all the muscles. Without bones, muscles would have nowhere to attach. Without a brain and spinal cord, the heart, lungs, and muscles can’t operate. Each organ has its special ability, the purpose of which is to contribute to the well-being of the whole body.

Paul argued that just as each body part had its own contribution to make towards the well-being all the parts, so each member of the community contributes towards the well-being of the church, the body of Christ. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

On this Martin Luther King holiday weekend, I would suggest this is a good time to recommit ourselves to the common good, for politicians to use their power, not for the good of their donors and special interest groups, but for the whole of the country. We just

launched a space telescope to peer back over 13 billion years. We will be able to see the first stars and galaxies forming. If we can do that, surely, we can find a way to make it easy for every citizen of the United States to vote.

I know there isn't full agreement on the cause of climate change and how much humans can actually do about it. Even so, making sure we take care of God's creation as best we can, could be a way to contribute to the common good. In a recent New York Times article, evangelical Christian and scientist, Katharine Hayhoe, claimed the big problem is that people just don't know what to do. She said, "Just start by doing *something*, anything, and then talk about it. Talk about what it means for your family, your home, your city..."

When I was growing up, my parents tried to teach me to look beyond my own interests. It started with the small things. If you have something your friend doesn't, you share. Let the guest sit in the most comfortable chair. Hold the door for the next person.

In time, my parents applied that teaching to every aspect of my life. I remember a day, when I was in middle school. My dad and I were in the backyard. For some reason, I was concerned about not knowing what I wanted to be when I grew up. When I told my dad, he said, "The first thing you have to do is discover what it is that you love to do."

He said, "When you discover what that is, do it long enough to get good at it." Lastly, he said, "When you get good at it, then you can make a difference with it." I found those words profound enough to remember all these years. Honestly, as I look back, I'm still impressed he came up with such sound advice, off the top of his head.

Discover what you love to do. Do it long enough to get good at it. Then, make a difference with it. My dad framed the issue in such a way that the ultimate goal was to go beyond myself. It was to make a difference in the lives of others. It was to have a positive impact on the world.

As I look out over this sanctuary, I can't see anybody. But as I imagine each of you in your pew, I'm very aware of the gifts represented in this congregation. Some of you teach in the community and assist with church school and adult classes here at the church. Some of you are great cooks. After the Christmas season, my waistline attests to that. You bring meals to church members in crisis, or make cookies for church events. Some of you are gifted singers and musicians and add so much to our worship. Some of you are spiritually-gifted in finance. You assist the church in being good stewards of our assets. Some of you are handy and you take on tasks to maintain our building and grounds.

Some of you are gifted writers and thinkers and do I have an opportunity for you. You may have heard, we're putting together a Lenten devotional made up of contributions from our First Parish members and friends. I hope you'll consider writing something so the community can benefit from your spiritual gift. (The sooner I get 40 of them, the sooner I'll stop talking about it.)

The Apostle Paul claimed each of us has received our particular "manifestation of the Spirit" for the common good. That means our task is to find ways to contribute, to allow others to benefit from the Spirit's gifts. And I know this isn't necessarily easy. It might require courage and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, but it's necessary for the well-being of the body.

In the words of author Vera Nazarian, "Each letter of the alphabet is a steadfast loyal soldier in a great army of words, sentences, paragraphs, and stories. One letter falls, and the entire language falters."

Dr. King said, "In a real sense all life is inter-related. All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

Jesus said, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house."

Whatever your God-given skill or talent or ability, it wasn't meant to hide. It was meant for the common good.

