

The (Un)Common Good

Nehemiah 2:17-18; Matthew 22:36-40

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 15) 2023

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I love the old term, “the common good.” It is not one we hear much anymore, although it is an old, even ancient term, with a rich and noble tradition. In fact, these days to speak of “the common good” is to invite outright criticism, hostility, and charges of socialism. The common good has become uncommon. Nevertheless, it’s a term we don’t want to lose. The common good is something we want to work to keep, renew, and recover.

I want to talk about the common good this particular morning since our Texas Governor Greg Abbott has called upon churches and preachers to talk about school vouchers, or “parental choice” as he calls it, on this Sunday. I don’t have a high opinion of governors suggesting what churches should talk about on Sunday morning. Frankly, I don’t think governors know enough to suggest what we should be talking about on Sunday. It gets my dander up.

For the governor “parental choice” is a term some political consultant came up with to make the old, repudiated term “vouchers” go down with the voters more easily. But the governor’s “parental choice” is nothing more than using public tax dollars to pay private schools.

As I said in the paper yesterday, as a pastor I have nothing against private schools, most of which are religious schools. I simply do not believe that we should use public money to pay for private schools. Private schools should trust

God and raise the money privately and practice the free exercise of our religion without support of the State.

In other words, the governor's and the lieutenant governor's plans are nothing more than another ploy to hurt our public schools and move toward privatizing our children's education. Private schools, just like privatization everywhere else means there is no public accountability. Privatization means schools answer to their private board and shareholders, not the parents and not a publicly elected school board. It means the private school gets to choose which students they'll accept and on what terms. They are not required to meet accountability standards for students with disabilities, for instance. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick even calls his version of the voucher scheme, "school choice." Vouchers mean each household gets \$8000 in tax credits and that money (taken away from public school tax money) is redirected to a private school, even though private school education costs on average in Texas from \$10,000 to \$30,000 per year. Books, fees, meals, uniforms, etc. are all on top of that, which adds up to several more thousands of dollars. Plus, you provide your own transportation. Families who can afford all this get a "tax break" while everyone else gets left in deteriorating public schools with declining funding.

There is this decided turn in America toward privatization and private money-making corporations taking over our public life. If the streets are unsafe, instead of reducing poverty, buy a private alarm system, move into a gated community, hire private security companies, and pass more concealed handgun laws so we can all tote a firearm. If the water is tainted, don't improve it, buy bottled water and people who can't afford it are on their own. When our roads and

highways are clogged, don't push for public transportation, instead, let's build privately owned roads – toll ways. If the future of Social Security is threatened, instead of overhauling the system, let's create private investment accounts so we can count on the market for our long-term retirement security. We could go on and on.

Amid all this, I want to call us to what's becoming uncommon – the common good. Let me be clear, this is not my idea, this is God's idea, it is God's call, and it is God's Way.

The common good is rooted in the teachings and Way of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that a religion scholar comes up to Jesus and asks, "What's the most important commandment?"

Jesus responds, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the most important. But there is a second one that is connected to it. They go together: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Everything hangs on these two central commandments" (Matt. 22:36-40).

These two commandments – love God and love neighbor – are so integrated in biblical thought and living that the great theologian Walter Brueggemann says that in truth we need to combine them somehow into something like, "God/Neighbor." Just make one word "God/Neighbor" to describe the biblical call of loving God and loving neighbors. You cannot do one without the other.

Let me make an aside here. Jesus' call to these commandments is no call to unhealthy self-denial or an ascetic life of self-abnegation. Jesus' call is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

I've spent most of my life working on loving God and loving my neighbor and never paying much attention to myself. But in the last few years I'm having to learn that loving self, taking care of myself is part of Christ's call to wholeness. After a lifetime of self-forgetfulness and taking myself for granted, people like Dr. Eric are helping me realize that taking care of my physical, mental, and medical health is integral to loving God and loving my neighbor. Indeed, we have a church full of doctors, nurses, and mental health professionals dedicated to helping us and helping this town love our neighbors as ourselves.

The great commandment to which Jesus calls us, is a combination of the two core commandments of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). Islam's Holy Qur'an says, "Serve God, and join not any partners with Him; and do good – to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (ye meet), and what your right hands possess." [The Holy Qur'an, al-Nisaa 4:36].

And as I've said, every major religion that I know anything about make loving our neighbor as central.

From this central teaching of Christianity, that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves radiated outward this sense of caring for our neighbors and we called it the common good – the good we share together.

In the late 4th century, one of the church fathers, John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) said, "This is the rule of most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the common good...for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbors" (Homily 25 on I

Cor. 11:1).

This call to love our neighbor is the foundation for reestablishing and reclaiming the common good, which has fallen into cultural, social, and political—and even religious—neglect.

A working definition of the term “common good” is the “sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups, or as individuals, to flourish.” The common good is the good that we share as a society, as a public, as a community. It is more than what I might consider good for me. It is the good for all of us. It is knowing that what is good for me is connected with what is good for all of us.

The Scripture we just heard says that Nehemiah had returned to the city of Jerusalem which had been destroyed by the Babylonians a century before. He looked over the ruined walls and came up with a plan. He told his fellow Jews that we have to rebuild the walls. And the Jews responded, “Let’s start building!” And then the Scripture says, “So they committed themselves to the common good.”

Nehemiah and the people knew that it was in the good interests of everyone that they rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Rebuilding the walls were of benefit to more than any one person; it was for protection of everyone in the community. Everyone belonged and it was of personal and communal benefit to rebuild the walls. It was a common or community good.

It is for the common good that we all have clean air to breathe. So we ask our government to enact laws and we want those laws enforced, that will regulate polluters and try to keep the air we breathe clean. It is for the good of the

community.

It is for the common good that we all, everyone, have access to education – so this country came up with the idea of what we call community or public schools. This young nation believed that it was essential for a democracy that its citizens be educated. And since not everyone can have their own private tutors or private schools as in old Europe, we decided that if we put our money together, in the form of taxes, we could have schools which serve everyone – for the common good. The common good is good for all of us and at the same time, it takes all of us to have it.

In old Europe, the wealthy elite had private estates on which they could have outdoor recreation. But here, we decided that outdoor recreation was something that was good for all of us. So we used our money together, in the form of taxes, to create and maintain parks. Parks are for the common good.

Likewise, in the early 1900's, both Republicans and Democrats realized that there were parts of this country that were still wilderness, which needed to be protected from private development and preserved for the common good. This was wilderness of such beauty and wildness, that for the good of everyone, including the land and nature itself, it must be set aside and protected. So, again using everyone's money – tax dollars – national parks were bought and created.

Have you ever thought about public social services we probably take for granted were a choice “we the people” made for the common good. For example, by the time of the late 1800's and early 1900's in America, the time of reform, the Progressive Era, and the Social Gospel, the sense of the common good took on

renewed life. This was on the heels of the Gilded Age when post-Civil War industrialism and capitalism took off. The Gilded Age was the time of the accumulation of great wealth by a few. But “we the people” knew that some things needed reform and regulation for the common good, not just for the good of the wealthy and powerful few. So as cities and towns began to figure out things like water and city water systems, electrical and phone utilities, the building of roads and transportation, parks, hospitals, and so on, there was a choice made in favor of public or community ownership or regulation over against private ownership free from regulation. So you had municipal water – not water owned by a private company and municipal sewer systems – not sewers owned by a private corporation. City and public parks – not parks owned by private companies. All of this was because it was deemed essential to the benefit of everyone.

Nowadays, all of that seems in danger. I’ve told this story before, but I like the story and it gets to what I’m talking about. Writer Scott Russell Sanders tells of a lawsuit in his hometown of Bloomington, IN, in which a man is suing the city because the city ordinance says that everyone must shovel the snow from their sidewalks, in order that people can walk down the sidewalks in winter. The man filing the lawsuit said, “I don’t use the sidewalk and I don’t care about anyone else. For the city to tell me I must shovel my sidewalk is socialism.”

No sense that it helps someone else. No sense that we’re all in this together. No sense of being neighborly. Just the notion that I’m a private individual and do not answer to anyone else.

It’s much of the same argument used against our own efforts to expand city sidewalks throughout our town – sidewalks that encourage people to get out and

walk and meet their neighbors, and sidewalks that help people who must walk (they don't have a car) to be safe.

Likewise, Sanders tells of an extension agent who travels the county explaining to farmers the new regulations that limit the amounts and kinds of poisons they can spray on their land. The poisons wash down the streams to the lands below them or the wind blows the poisons to other farms and nearby towns. And the rest of us end up eating the chemicals and poisons. The extension agent says his standard reception is to be called a communist. Some of the farmers, especially the big agri-businessmen and the agri-chemical companies say that it is un-American to restrict the poisons a person wants to use on his land, no matter how much it affects their neighbors (Scott Russell Sanders, *A Conservationist Manifesto*, p. 37-38).

Again, who cares about anyone else? No sense of the common good. No sense of loving my neighbor. I want to do what I consider good for me.

We could go on.

So what do we do?

Mostly, I'm simply encouraging you to do what you've already been doing for a long time. But if you're not already, get involved. Support common good causes and efforts. Go to the Farmers' Market, support community theatre, advocate for sidewalks, green spaces, public transportation, recycling, and shelters for the homeless. Support the city bond election coming up. Advocate for our East Texas rivers and watersheds and lakes. And most important today – in the interest of our governor's call – advocate loudly and strongly for our public schools and

consider volunteering. The schools, the teachers, and most of all the students need our help. Teachers need to be paid better and provided with resources to support the classroom.

On all these things we must speak up and speak out. We must vote. Otherwise, the common good won't be heard.

The most important thing, the most essential thing is the same thing the early Christians did: share our lives with one another. The ancient world of the Roman Empire had little sense of what sharing a common life looked like or if it was of any worth. Today's world around us has little sense of it either. So it is up to communities in Christ, like us, to demonstrate that sharing is more important than division and that the common life allows us to flourish more than the privatized, isolated life. So we showed up yesterday at the Chism's house for common work and a common lunch. We show up and participate in Sunday School, give sacrificially of our money, visit the sick and shut-in, and stay today for our once-a-month potluck dinner, which we're about to have once I shut up and sit down. All of these and more are ways we live a common and shared life as a witness to what God wants and what Jesus Christ has done.

They said, "Let's start building." And the story says, "So they committed themselves to the common good."

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.