

“Our Common Good”

Nehemiah 2:17-18; I Corinthians 12:4-7

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Last week we talked about Jeremiah and his letter to the Jews in exile and their calling to practice shalom (communal wholeness, justice, peace, harmony, etc.) where they were. Today we fast forward about a hundred years to Nehemiah, appointed by the king of Persia to be the Jewish governor and lead the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. Over a hundred years before, in 587 BCE, Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians and most of the inhabitants had been killed or carried off. But in the one hundred years which had passed, Persia had risen up and conquered Babylon and the Persian Empire had different policies from the old Babylonian Empire. The Persians knew that if their far-flung provinces were peaceful and flourishing, then not only would their tax revenues increase but they could also concentrate on the places where there was trouble. So, they sent a Jew to lead the Jews out of exile, to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and re-inhabit the land.

For over a century the grass and weeds had grown among the rubble where the Temple built by Solomon had once stood. The city's walls had been torn down and the city had been burned. Furthermore, the land was not totally uninhabited. There were other tribes, rival groups, and bandits in the land. Not everyone wanted the Jews back. So, when Nehemiah came to the ruined city, he discovered quickly that they needed to begin rebuilding the city by rebuilding the walls for their

common protection against the marauders and the bandits.

The Scripture we just heard says that Nehemiah surveyed the city, looked over the ruined walls, and came up with a plan. He told his fellow Jews that we must rebuild the walls. And the Jews responded, “Let’s start building!” And then the Scripture says, “So they committed themselves to the common good.”

I love that sentence: “they committed themselves to 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. It is a term we don’t want to lose. More, the common good is something we want to work to keep, renew, and recover.

What am I talking about when I say, “the common good?” A working definition is the “sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups, or as individuals, to flourish,” and in the Jewish and Christian traditions it is a kind of preview of shalom. 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.

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. Once the walls were rebuilt then they could start rebuilding the city. It was a

common or community good.

It is for the common good that we all have clean air to breathe. So, we ask, agitate, and organize for 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 all 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 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.

Now I could go on in giving examples of the common good and I hope you're already thinking of other examples: roads and highways and public transportation, hospitals and health care, fire protection, police and law enforcement, prisons, public libraries, the public regulation of private industry, and the sense that utilities should be regulated by the community or public. We could go on, but you get the idea.

The sense of the common good in this country comes from several sources but let me mention most specifically the one that comes from our own tradition, the Christian tradition.

We believe that in Jesus Christ all things were reconciled or atoned. Atoned is that word which means "at-one." In Jesus Christ we were made one with God, with each other, and with all of God's creation. Atonement, reconciliation – that which was separated, cut-off, dismembered is now re-membered, made one. The Apostle Paul said to the church at Colossae, "Jesus Christ is before all things, and in him all things cohere" or all things hold together (Colossians 1:17).

And as I mentioned earlier, atonement, reconciliation, new creation ... all are terms theologically synonymous with the Jewish understanding of shalom.

When the early church came together, they sought to embody and practice

this sense of shalom and belonging; this sense of the shared or common life made possible because of Jesus. In Acts 2: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2: 44-46). And in Acts 4 the same story is told (see Acts 4: 32-35).

The Apostle Paul explained to the church in Corinth that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to each and every Christian. Not everyone has the same gift but everyone has some gift. And these gifts are not given for our own private benefit but “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (I Cor. 12:7). Paul says that it is for the good of all the church that each member is given the gifts of the Spirit. There are no private gifts.

As a result, the church learned to see differently. They looked outwardly and saw how we’re all meant to fit together, sharing a common life. And there was a ripple effect from the church outward of creating a connected life – a commonwealth.

Let me jump forward. By the time of the Middle Ages, much, very much had changed about how the church saw itself. By the Middle Ages everyone in society was considered Christian. Hence, we give the name Christendom to Medieval European society. Much had changed from the days of the early church but there were some things that Christendom held onto. The newly organized monasteries still had all things in common and in the wider society there was still a sense of the

“commons.” In Europe, especially in England, there were some lands, forests, and rivers which were considered common – that which was available for everyone’s use. The concept of the church had changed from the time of the earliest Christians, and they no longer shared all things in common but by the Middle Ages there was still a sense that God’s will was for a common and shared life and having some land, forests, and rivers in common demonstrated that. Commons were used for farming and for cattle and sheep to graze; there were forests in which everyone could hunt and rivers from which everyone could fish.

We don’t have time to trace all of this but suffice it to say that some of that sense of the commons was passed along in our Western culture so that it showed up in this sense of the common good in America. Let me be clear, there were other traditions and ways of thinking which fed this American notion of the common good. Classical thinking going back to Plato and Aristotle, through the ancient Romans is part of it. James Madison, writing in the Federalist Papers, talks about the common good.

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 private individuals. City and public parks – not parks owned by private companies. All of this was because it was deemed essential to the benefit of everyone.

Alongside of this sense of American common-good, has also been a tradition of liberty and freedom defined as “free to do what I want without anyone else.” Add to it the increasing individualism and privatization in our society, and our common good can be in danger.

Writer Scott Russell Sanders tells of a lawsuit in his hometown of Bloomington, IN, in which a man sued the city because the city ordinance said 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.

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 being neighborly. I want to do what I consider good for me.

So many of our politicians, much less our neighbors, rarely seem to notice the common good anymore. Everything is about privatization. If crime is a problem, instead of working on the roots of what causes crime, we are encouraged to buy a private alarm system, move into a gated community, hire private security companies, and pass more handgun laws so we can all tote our own firearm – essentially each person becomes the law unto himself or herself.

If the public schools are failing, instead of providing more funding, pay teachers, and work hard at improving them, we instead turn to private schools. 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.

So, what do we do?

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 our community schools and teachers, advocate for our East Texas rivers and watersheds and lakes. Be advocates for justice for everyone in our city, state, and country – not just a few. You get the idea. But we must speak up and speak out. 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 life. By showing up for intergenerational Vacation Bible School, teaching or participating in Sunday School, giving sacrificially of your money, volunteering for ministry projects, sharing meals, helping each other, and visiting the sick. 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.

Bill Moyers tells the story of a man who walked out in his front yard and noticed a commotion down the street. He went down to see what all the fuss was about and saw there was a fight going on. The man tapped someone on the shoulder and asked, “Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?”

We’re called to join in, participate. Practice the Way of Christ of embodying shalom and the common good and let that ripple outward in our wider community. And sometimes it means we have to get into a non-violent fight – speaking up and speaking out, getting out the votes, and organize, organize, organize. All these things and more are about sharing our common life.

“Let’s start building. So, they committed themselves to the common good.”

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