

The Common Good

The Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

May 19, 2019

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Just before I sat down to write this sermon on Saturday morning, I went for my usual walk on the East Bay Bike Path. I walk every day (but Sunday – even I can't get up THAT early) and with each footstep I give thanks to God that this beautiful walking trail is available to me to savor each day. The stretch I walk meanders along Bullocks Cove so I see all sorts of seabirds amongst the sea oats and reeds lining the shoreline as far as the eye can see. On weekday mornings my companions on my walk are the squirrels and robins, the red-winged blackbirds and the bluejays. At low tide I'm also joined by snowy egrets and blue herons, cormorants, swans, several species of ducks and of course, the geese. Not so on Saturdays, especially now that the weather is good again meaning the tranquility of the bike path is gone, replaced with racing cyclists, clueless roller-bladers and people walking dogs who haven't been on a decent walk all week. Yikes!

Yesterday during my walk, I was confronted – and yes, that is the word I want to use – confronted by a huge cycling club riding south on the bike path as I was headed north, back home. Since we were heading in opposite directions, we were theoretically traveling in the same lane on the bike path. In such

an instance, the cyclists are to give way to the pedestrian. This is usually what happens, but not always, and yesterday was a “not always” situation. After the first few riders cycled past me (there were about 30) I soon realized they were not giving me much room as they passed. In fact, after a few more riders passed, I realized they were treating me as nothing more than an obstacle with the challenge being how close they could come to me without hitting me. Just as I realized this, the last rider sped by so I just kept walking ... and fuming. By the time I got to my house, I realized that this whole incident was in fact an excellent example of the notion of the common good and its precarious existence in contemporary American society.

I knew I had the same right to be on the bike path as that cycling group. Even though it's called a “bike path” the rest of the signage about the rules of the path are clear that pedestrians have equal use of it. This means I had no right to be angry about the cyclists infringing on my way of enjoying the bike path by walking. Nor did they have any right to be annoyed with me – as several of them clearly were – for walking on the same bike path they were attempting to cycle on. This is because the bike path exists for the common enjoyment – the common good, if you will – of both cyclists and pedestrians. Yet, the reality is that their presence caused me consternation and my presence did so for them. So, what should happen? Well, if the posted rules and commonly

understood norms of the path were observed, the cyclists would have passed me with an appropriate distance between me and them. Some of them did, but certainly not all of them. More importantly, once one cyclist treated me as an obstacle to come as close to as possible, the others behind him started to do the same. In that instance, the common good started to evaporate as I ceased being a person to some of them becoming instead an obstacle seen as a challenge to overcome.

This is an example of how the notion of the common good has become so elusive in our society today. In his book *The Common Good*, published just last year, Robert Reich argues that the notion of the common good which used to be so prevalent in how we thought about America has fallen into misuse as shrill, hyper-partisanship has come to dominate our public discourse. Reich defines the common good as “our shared values about what we owe one another as citizens who are bound together in the same society” (Sandel, NY Times, April 2, 2018) He continues to articulate what he believes those fundamental shared values to be: 1) respect for the rule of law and democratic institutions; 2) toleration of differences; and, 3) belief in equal rights and opportunities for all. (Sandel) Reich argues that these are not political beliefs because they are something both Democrats and Republicans would acknowledge as American, as what makes us a people. Most importantly, he maintains that the current erosion

of the notion of the common good we are experiencing now in this country is due to an obvious breakdown in moral restraint as the pursuit of power and money becomes all consuming for those in leadership positions in government and industry. This has come about, he believes, because of the “whatever it takes to win” attitude so pervasive on both sides of the political aisle.

Reich’s articulation of the problem is, I think, right on target, providing much important fodder for thought and lots and lots of conversation. However, his suggested remedies are less helpful in the sense that they seem pretty “pie-in-the-sky.” For example, one is that all leaders, both corporate and governmental, see their roles as Trustees of the common good rather than approaching it from the “what’s in it for me” attitude so prevalent today. Just how would that transition happen? Reich doesn’t say. A second is to enact a mandatory requirement for civic education about what it means to be a good citizen, including a mandatory two years of public service be imposed on everyone. Great idea, but ... Really? He also advocates for the use of honor and shame in public discourse, honoring not those who gain wealth and celebrity at any cost but instead honoring those who devote their lives to preserving the common good, such as first responders, teachers, social workers, and so on. Shaming would be applied liberally to those who pursue personal profit at all cost, including the diminishment of others’ personal and financial well-being. Again,

Reich's ideas are excellent fodder for deep conversation, but how practical are they really. Not very, I'm afraid. So, where does that leave us, the good people of this little church nestled in this lovely seaside community? How do we think about the common good in our lives, in this community, in our church? What can we do and how should we do it?

Lucky for us, our friend the Apostle Paul has written some words of wisdom on this very issue for the folks of the ancient church in Corinth which also apply to us. They were dealing with a host of challenges not all that different from many of the issues we still struggle with today. Corinth was a provincial capital in the Roman Empire with a rather unique history. It was totally destroyed by Rome in 146 BC, including the removal of its original citizenry. It was then repopulated a few years later with freed slaves from across the Empire. This meant that Corinth had no hereditary ruling class. It also meant that many different cultures and religions existed side by side in this bustling ancient city. This is what Paul is referring to in the text we read this morning when he reminds the people they had once been pagans deceived into believing that idols were gods. Then he makes a curious statement about discerning who is really talking for Jesus and who isn't. To our 21st century ears, this sounds really strange but it actually provides the key to the meaning of this whole passage.

Here Paul is responding to what had become a real problem in the Corinthian church. It seemed that some of local church leaders had come to put a lot of emphasis on glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. Glossolalia was believed to come about when the Holy Spirit came into a person's being in such a way as to make it possible for them to speak in what they believed to be the language of heaven. To the rest of the people, it sounded like gibberish but these people insisted it was a gift from God which showed how important they were. They even started to develop a hierarchy in the church based solely on who possessed the gift of glossolalia and who didn't. Enter Paul who was having none of this. This is why he says what he says about blessing and cursing Jesus: "I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." Don't put so much emphasis on speaking in tongues, he is saying, because if you do and someone who speaks in tongues curses Jesus, then what? Will you then deny Jesus? And anyone can say Jesus is Lord, if their love for Jesus is foremost in their hearts. Speaking in tongues has nothing to do with the ability to do that.

But Paul doesn't stop there. To make his point that glossolalia is equal among the other gifts of the Spirit, he ranks them in the list which we see in verses 4-11. First, he lists wisdom followed by knowledge, then faith, then healing, then the

working of miracles, and then prophecy. Only at the end of the list does he place glossolalia or speaking in tongues and then the interpretation of those tongues. In this way, he does not dismiss glossolalia as a gift since it was so important to so many in the church. But he makes it clear that it is only one of many gifts of the Spirit and not the most important one.

The other point he makes provides the foundation for the whole conversation about gifts of the Spirit. He states unequivocally that “there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” Paul is saying everyone has gifts from God and all those gifts are equally important to the well-being of the community. Why? “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* In other words, Paul is saying quite clearly that it’s not the gift that matters. It’s not the person’s individual abilities or talents that matters at all. It’s how God intends those gifts to be used for the common good. Further, it is the community itself which helps the individual identify and nurture their God-given talent so it will benefit everyone and not just the individual. The gifts of wisdom and knowledge are used to identify the gifts for faith and healing in others. The gifts of working miracles and uttering prophecy come further down the

list because they don't happen that often and when they do, wisdom is required to discern their validity. The same is true with the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. And the over-arching guiding principle in discerning and making the best use of all these gifts present in everyone is to work hard to figure out how each gift can be used most effectively in the best interest of the whole group. The common good is the final measuring tool to be used in putting each and every gift to the best use. Sounds simple enough. It just means putting everyone's best interests first instead of your own, right? Yes, exactly. And, honestly, is anything about that going to be easy or simple in our society as it is today? I don't think so.

Dear friends, the simple truth is that it is human nature to put ourselves first. Time is limited. Finances are limited. How can we take care of ourselves and our own needs if we always put the group first? And what group is it anyhow? The family? The church? Our community? Our country? You can see how quickly this simple concept of Paul's, and Robert Reich's for that matter, becomes so mired down in the details of putting wonderful notions to practical use. There is nothing easy or simple about it. But that doesn't mean it's okay to give up. That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to work for the common good. Dear friends, we must work for the common good. We must stop and think about how our individual actions have an impact on the whole

community. Dear friends, it matters what we do and how we do it. On everything from caring for Creation to managing our finances, it matters what we decide we will, and will not, do. If we use harmful pesticides, it not only kills unwanted weeds, it also kills hummingbirds, bees and people! If we insist on the convenience of endless plastic containers, we are literally choking the life out of our planet. If we count the cost of community improvements like repaving roads or building affordable housing in our neighborhoods more than we celebrate all the good these things will accomplish for so many in our community, then we are failing to use what God has given us for the common good.

None of this is easy or simple which is why it is not a conundrum, a challenge, to be faced alone. It must be done within the context of a community – a community like this one, a faith community whose purpose and work is to figure out together how it is God needs us to be in the world each day as the persons God created us to be. Simply put, we need each other to figure out the “common” part of the common good. When you stop to think about it, how else could we do it? Amen.