

PURSUE THE COMMON GOOD

12:21 Series (Part 3) | Romans 12:9-16

Christians are Counter-Cultural People

As we head this week into what may be the most bitterly contested election, in one of the most divided and exhausting periods in American history, I want to read some words that strike me as being about as counter-cultural to our times as any I can imagine. Listen to God's Word as it comes to us again from Romans chapter 12...

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. (Rom 12:10). Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality... (Rom 12:13) Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. (Rom 12:15) Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. (Rom 12:16)

If you've been with us these last two weeks, or might be willing to go to our website and pick up the messages you didn't hear, then you'll know that Paul wrote Roman 12 to remind the Church of its identity and mission. Paul has been saying that what makes the followers of Jesus different -- what allows them to be the kind of transforming salt and light that every society needs -- is that they will not be conformed to the pattern of this world. They will vote based on their sense of which candidate or policies best aligns not with some earthly empire but with the ethics of God's kingdom. They are not primarily conformed to the left-and-right, red-and-blue, this race-and-those-people pattern of this world. Instead, they value everyone because of the image of God in them and the gifts each can bring to the whole.

But here in this text, Paul turns up the dial further and makes it clear that the followers of Jesus won't just care for everyone, they will be champions for the GOOD of everyone. They will be people who demonstrate an exceptional kind of devotion, honor, sharing, hospitality, empathy, desire for harmony and association with other people.

They will not be satisfied with merely pursuing their own good. In fact, the Apostle Paul specifically says: **Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor 12:7).**

Individualism & Moral Awareness

I'd like to think with you today about that phrase "**the common good**" and what it would mean for you and me to be people who pursue it together. To appreciate how counter-cultural that calling is, you have to look no further than the very WORDS most frequently used in our society. A few years ago, a group of researchers used Google to conduct a study of the words and phrases appearing in books of the last half-century.

Scanning some three-quarters of a million books, the researchers found that, over time, COMMUNAL language, such as "community goals... work as a team... band together... share... we are one..." and even that phrase, "the common good," had steadily declined in usage. At the same time, researchers found that there'd been a significant increase in INDIVIDUALISTIC language. Phrases like, "I am the greatest... I love me... my needs... I can do it myself... I come first" had overshadowed the former communal lens.

Certain words had especially gone out of vogue. The use of the word "gratitude" declined 49%, "humbleness" by 52%, and "kindness" by 56%. The words, "modesty," "discipline," "honesty," "patience," "faith," "wisdom," and even "evil" had all faded significantly from the mainstream of American discourse. During the same period, a University of Michigan study found that "empathy" – the inclination or ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and really *consider* or even *feel* what their experience might bring up – had declined since 1970 by 40% -- with the biggest drop since the year 2000.

Commenting on this trend, columnist, David Brooks observed: *"Over the past half-century, society has become more individualistic. As it has become more individualistic, it has also become less morally aware, because social and moral fabrics are inextricably linked. [The first two trends] have led to certain forms of social breakdown, which government has tried to address, sometimes successfully and often impotently."*

I would add that government is immensely important, but it isn't and will never be enough to shape the underlying moral character that makes a society great. As Chuck Colson said: *"While politics is based on the premise that society must be changed in order to change people, in the politics of the Kingdom it is people who must be changed in order to change society... The Church's role is to transform society primarily by putting on display God's love, revealed in Jesus Christ."*

I don't think it is an accident that these changes in language, in moral framework, and even in the ability to feel for others has declined at about the same rate that local church attendance has also descended. Which is why I don't believe that this is – as both sides say – the most important election in history. It IS important and I pray that every single one of us will exercise our precious freedom to vote. But, as my friend Mike Woodruff recently observed, *"The most important question is not who we install as President, but who you and I allow to be our King."*

A King Concerned for the Good of All

The Christians to whom the Apostle Paul wrote, lived under an Emperor, but they made Jesus their King. They followed a King who once poured himself out teaching a crowd of thousands. When it was lunchtime, his disciples said, tell the people to go home and fend for themselves. But Jesus worked to make sure all 5,000 got fed (Luke 9:12-17).

The first Christians followed a King who while thronged by admiring peasants stopped to have lunch with Zaccheus, a despised rich man, because he too mattered to God (Luke 19:1-10). The early Christians followed a King who on another occasion went way of his way to extend love to a Samaritan woman whose own village had written off as hopeless. And her changed life helped transform her community's life (John 4:1-42).

The disciples noticed that their King did not work simply for the well-being of a privileged few or only for the disadvantaged. They watched him spread his arms wide on a cross to embrace those who love him AND those who hated him. And they remembered his words that: **Whoever would be greatest among you, must become the servant of ALL (Mark 9:35).**

I've wondered recently what Jesus would make of today's debate over the proposed "Fair Tax" amendment to the Illinois *Constitution*. Have you followed that debate? Do you own a TV?! Some say, *"It's about time we made the millionaires and billionaires pay their fair share."* While others say, *"Why would you make me more vulnerable to the taxing power of a State government that shows so little fiscal responsibility?"*

It has become like this in lots of places, hasn't it? The conversation is increasingly

individualistic instead of communal. It's about what works for ME, instead of what could make society work better for ALL of US. I don't know what you make of the comedian, Trevor Noah, but I read an interview in the Wall Street Journal Magazine recently in which he was asked: ***What's the one thing you hope to see change in the world?*** Noah answered: *"For people to stop seeing society as a zero-sum game. We've convinced ourselves that in order for one person to win, another has to lose."*

Even at our best today, it seems like the highest we reach to attain is what political scientists have called the **Public Interest**. The Public Interest is defined as *"the most good for the most people."* In that sense and in the short-term, voting for the Fair Tax amendment (just as an example) seems like a slam-dunk. Address our state budget crisis and all those public pension needs by asking more of the affluent. That would seem to help the most people.

But the **Common Good** is something different. Political philosophers and theologians define the Common Good as *"the most good for all people."* Pursuing that would involve bringing lawmakers and business leaders together in a spirit of mutual consideration and mutual sacrifice to craft a strategy to address our budget crisis AND preserve a vital business community that ultimately lifts all people.

When Foolishness is Wise

By now, some of you are thinking, "Dan, you're crazy. You are naïve. You are uninformed." I may well be. You don't need to vote for me! But it's the job of Christian pastors and, I would suggest of every disciple, to live with what theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr once called a ***"sublime madness."*** As impractical or impossible as it seems to achieve, because we have the King we do, we must never stop praying for and pursuing a vision that lifts ALL to an even greater state of flourishing.

This is how the Early Church approached life. They didn't reject rich people like Joseph of Arimathea or Lydia of Philippi. They valued and inspired them. They didn't ignore poor people like Lazarus. The Book of Acts, chapters 2 and 4, tells us that they were known for giving to others as they had real need. It wasn't law and order OR mercy; personal responsibility OR compassion; Jews OR Gentiles; workers OR masters. It was pursuing hope for all. And the Bible said that so beautiful was their way of life that, **"They enjoyed the favor of all the people, and the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47).**

For all its faults, the Church of Jesus Christ has, throughout history, kept alive the sublime madness that, with God's help, we can move a lot closer to the Common Good.

For example, in a famous encyclical in 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote: *"The common good is the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."* In this paper, Leo outlined a vision that might seem commonplace to us today, but only because it unleashed a revolution of thinking that helped lead to the world we have. Leo spoke of the rights of workers to a fair wage, safe working conditions, and the formation of trade unions. But he also affirmed the rights of property owners and free enterprise. He boldly opposed both socialism and laissez-faire capitalism. He believed, as St. Paul did that **Love must be sincere. We are to hate what is evil; and cling to what is good (Rom 12:9).** As I argued in the first installment of this series, no party, politician, or pastor has a corner on good or evil! We need each other to sort this out.

As we move to a close today, let me just say that other than trying to help us remember or learn more about the roots of the Christian movement, I've raised the topic of the Common Good for one strategic reason. I don't think the outcome of Tuesday's elections will be the end of our conflicts. Do you? So, how as followers of our King Jesus can we be a creative voice in the midst of that continuing mess?

Here are two ideas, courtesy of my friend, Andy Crouch. FIRST, start some conversations with your family, friends, or neighbors about the common good. You may not see eye-to-eye with them about what human flourishing looks like in all aspects. But raising the subject of what all people really need to thrive, can shift us from bitter battles over particular topics and move us to the fundamental questions and desires that often lie unexplored beneath them. *In a time when discussions between people with different convictions often end before they begin, we need conversation starters.*

But the SECOND reason to pursue the subject of the common good is because it allows us, says Andy, "to stake out our Christian convictions about what is good for humans—and to dare our neighbors to clarify their own convictions." Philosophy professor, Bradley Lewis asserts: In the simplest sense, the common good is God. It is God who satisfies what people need, individually and communally. "If we are not offering our neighbors the ultimate common good—the knowledge and love of God—we are not taking the idea of the common good seriously."

Let me leave you with this vision. You're on a plane flying high over a lovely land. We'll be doing that sort of thing again, one day, so hang in there! Anyway, you're eating your peanuts with your head down. You're surrounded by strangers. There is a feeling of tension in the plane. It has been a long time since most of any one on that flight felt really good. When, all of a sudden someone five rows in front of you begins to sing out a song that is both strange and familiar.

It begins with repeated intonations of a language you don't really know. "Is it Swahili?," you wonder. You don't have time to answer the question because, before you know it, another voice has joined in, but syncopated and with perfect pitch. And then another voice joins the chorus, and another, till suddenly you are surrounded by what seems an impossibly good, insanely beautiful chorus of a song about the great CIRCLE OF LIFE, the miracle of existence, the grace to keep striving, and the web that interconnects us all. In a moment, you and just about every other passenger on the plane are tapping their feet and singing along. A group of silent strangers has been transformed into a joyful airborne choir.

That's what actually happened on March 31, 2014 when a group of passengers on Virgin Australia Flight 970 found themselves in the midst of a flashmob choir, courtesy of the Australian cast of Disney's, THE LION KING. That's what I hope happens in the days following November 3. No matter how the election turns out, I pray that you and I will lift up the tune of hope the early church sang. As Matt Woodley remarks: "*There may not be a lot we can do to steer the plane or ensure a safe landing—but we can sing a song, united and joyful,*" of God's desire to lead us to the Common Good which, above all else, means to bring us to Himself.

Please pray with me...