

“The Common Good: Of Gnats and Camels”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Traditional Word

⁷ If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. —Deuteronomy 15:7 NRSV

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! — Matthew 23:23-24

Contemporary Word

"The Bible insists that the best test of a nation's righteousness is how it treats the poorest and most vulnerable in its midst." — Jim Wallis, Christian writer and social activist

Today we begin the next topic in our year of Social Justice: The Common Good. This is a topic near and dear to my heart because I passionately believe in the Common Good. There are many today who would have us believe that the Common Good is a myth, or a false construct, or some utopian ideal that can never be achieved, but I beg to differ. When we pool our resources and work towards common goals, then all of us benefit. This idea of a common good is not new and I really don't understand why it has come under attack so much lately. We have local leaders who are on the record as saying that the common good is a myth. How do we respond to such selfish language? How do we push-back against a non-Christian idea that puts the individual's needs ahead of the community's?

In Jesus' time, he dealt with this plenty. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus had much to say to the men who “sit on Moses' seat.” (Matt 23:2) He said this: ““Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! (Matt 23:23-24). Camels and

gnats. What a terrific metaphor for people who spend so much time pouring over the Torah and other laws to get at the finer point of law, but fail to see the bigger picture. One of human beings in need.

When we read the Gospel of Matthew we need to understand that many modern scholars consider this gospel as a counter-narrative—that is, they see it as a work of resistance, written for a largely Jewish community. It speaks over and against the status quo of a culture dominated by Roman imperial power and the sub-power wielded by synagogue control. The Pharisees had become so involved with protecting their power and position and privilege, by counting the gnats, the details, the rules-- that they were missing the “camel”—the big picture—the needs of the members of their community who were starving and quite literally dying on the temple steps.

We see examples of protecting the good of the community, the common good, all throughout the Hebrew Bible. It seems the entire Levitical code, that troublesome book of laws (which modern moralizers love to trot out for their injury of the week)—it seems Leviticus is filled with rules about how to live in community. Moses is often called the first public health officer because so much of the Mosaic canon, the laws of Moses, deal with rules for public health, the common good. The laws dealing with shellfish and pork? Those require complete cooking to ensure disease is not spread. Laws about wearing fabrics woven from different materials? Probably in place to ensure that only the high priests of the temple wore certain garments and the lowly rest of us wore lesser clothes. It was to ensure public order, so the uppity low-lives wouldn't start getting too big for their britches and start thinking that *they* might actually be equal to the temple leaders. It was for the common good that they maintain a clear distinction of who is in charge and who is to blindly obey those in charge. So the laws of Moses were a way for the community to protect itself, while maintaining its distinctive Jewish personality, and to do all of this within, at that time, Pharaoh's intimidating control. Some scholars have claimed that these laws provided a charter for a new community, one not driven by the oppressive ways of Pharaoh, but on the liberating ways of Adonai. It seems that at its most basic level, the laws of Moses hold a desire to create a community based on neighborliness and working for the common good. While some of the laws are

certainly bound by the contexts of the time and the biases of their writers, we can glean some very good instructions about social justice and how the community was to participate in the human family.

Flash forward a few thousand centuries with me to a more modern understanding of the common good: Some canonical examples of the common good in a modern liberal democracy include: our road system; our public parks; police protection and public safety; our courts and the judicial system; our public schools; Wichita's museums and cultural institutions; our public transportation; also, our civil liberties, such as the freedom of speech and the freedom of association; our system of property ownership; even our clean air and clean water are included in the common good; and what about our national defense.

The common good is an important concept in political philosophy because it plays a central role in our reflection about the public and private dimensions of our lives together—our community. Let's say that "public life" in our community consists of a shared effort among members to maintain these certain services for the sake of common interests—our police force, the fire department, public utilities—water, electric and gas. "Private life" then consists of our individual pursuit of personal projects and ambitions. As members of our community, we are each involved in our community's public life *and* in our own private lives, and this raises numerous questions about the nature and scope of each of these. For example, when are we supposed to make decisions based on the common good? Most of us would agree that we are required to do so if and when we act as legislators or civil servants. But what about as journalists, corporate executives, minister, teachers or consumers? More fundamentally, why should we care about the common good? What would be wrong with a community whose members withdraw from public life and focus exclusively on their own private lives? These are some of the questions that motivate our discussions of the common good. Participation in the life of our community is beneficial for all of us.

I think where we get off track in our conversations and disagreement about the common good is in regard to balance. How much do we expect from a common participation in society. Do we expect a community to provide lifelines and support for the most vulnerable among us? I believe the answer is a

resounding yes. But the conflict seems to be in determining who those vulnerable people are. And for how long should we provide resources for them. We've been chipping away at our public benefits for the vulnerable for decades. Many people slip through the cracks because of the unwieldy nature of our bureaucracy surrounding these benefits. We've made it harder and harder for the vulnerable in our communities to receive help, because we've instead chosen to blame the vulnerable for their situation, instead of looking at the systems that make people poor. A simple example of systemic poverty would be looking at the placement of payday loan stores. A simple Google search finds the nearest Payday loan store way up in Belair or over near 21st and Woodlawn. Most of this type of predatory financial institution is located in poorer neighborhoods. It makes economic sense if you're a purveyor of this type of "financial product". Put your supply where the demand is—but my point is this—the poor are often locked out of traditional financial institutions, for any number of reasons, and these predatory institutions, payday loans companies, have appeared to fill a need—at incredible cost to the consumers who use them. Payday loans and inaccessibility to more affordable financial institutions is just one example of systemic injustice aimed at making and keeping people poor. I'm picking on Speedy Cash, but there are plenty of other bad players out there—including used car dealerships, sub-prime insurance companies, landlords, the list goes on. Now, not everyone in those industries is a bad player, but we all know of numerous instances where people are taken advantage of. We seem to think that Caveat Emptor "buyer beware" is enough of an inoculation for our complicity in these situations, but there is so much financial illiteracy abounding that I don't think "Caveat Emptor" is really enough to salve our souls anymore. We need to do more for the common good in ways of providing access to fair financial products and good financial literacy education for everyone, starting at a very young age.

I want to spend a few minutes with our Hygiene Pantry. Every month hundreds of people gain access to basic hygiene products-- toothpaste, deodorant, laundry soap and toilet tissue—everyday necessities that cannot be purchased with most public assistance programs. Every month we celebrate the fact that we serve this many or that many families. Recently we hit a landmark number of families served.

I've checked with the pantry leadership and the consensus is that this is not so much out of an increased need, but more an increased awareness of our services. So, we should celebrate this greatly—however, the fact that there is any need at all in this supposed booming economy remains a tough reality for us all. On the one hand I'm so proud of the work of our pantry volunteers and on the other I'm crushed that so many people need our services. I'm grateful that we are able to provide this critical service for the common good in Wichita. Because of your careful sustaining of the hygiene pantry, people who might have to choose between diapers for their infant or feeding their family have a little more breathing space—they have options available that they might not otherwise have. And that is such a good thing. The underlying systemic injustices that create the increased need are not such a good thing.

Hopefully I've laid out a useful ethical and biblical foundation for our coming work with economic injustice and the common good. Author, theologian and activist Jim Wallis reminds us that "The Bible insists that the best test of a nation's righteousness is how it treats the poorest and most vulnerable in its midst." And I have to agree with him. Ultimately I have to revert to the wisdom given us in the Hebrew Bible and the words of the Prophet Micah in chapter 6, verse 8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" My Hebrew Bible professor at seminary, Lisa Davison helped me better understand those words like this: What does God require of us? To make justice happen. To love passionately as God loves. To remember that although we are not God, we are to reflect God's image in this world. The next time you are waving off the gnats of legalism and dogma that threaten to crush your spirit remember the words borne on the back of an old dusty camel: Make justice happen—love passionately as God loves—reflect God's image into the world. A world starved for your presence and your love.

AMEN

Please stand as you are able and sing our benediction song.

RESOURCES

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/mosaic-law>

Holy Bible NRSV

Lisa Davison, notes for *PC500 Interpretation Matters* at Phillips Theological Seminary, spring 2015.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/common-good/>