

January 16, 2022
“Common Good”
1 Corinthians 12:4-11
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

It's my birthday, so as a gift to myself and perhaps to you, too, I intend to keep this sermon shorter than usual. We'll see how I do. Here goes.

There's a national nonprofit organization in England, based in Liverpool, called *Together for the Common Good*. Established a decade ago, it was inspired by the more than two-decade working partnership between Liverpool's Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, David Sheppard and Derek Worlock.

They arrived in Liverpool within six months of each other in 1975, a few years after I was born, just to give you some important perspective (!), at a time when the city was bitterly divided across political, economic, racial and religious lines, battered by industrial decline and sectarian violence.

A time when Liverpool was trying to avoid becoming the next Belfast, in the early years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

In the context of deep division and political instability, the two bishops dedicated themselves to work together, and to actively bring people together – across difference and the face of conflict – for the good of the city. For the common good. And it appears that by a variety of measures, they were successful in doing so.

In honor and memory of their legacy and commitment to the common good, a monument was dedicated and placed in the middle of Hope Street, HOPE Street – at each end of which stand the Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals. You can't make this stuff up!

Bishop Sheppard's daughter, Jenny, went on to found Together for Common Good, which, following in her father's footsteps, now organizes and fosters relationship-building across difference toward the “renewal of civic ecology,” “bringing COVENANTAL THINKING into church and civic life.” And based on belief in “the sacred nature of our

common humanity," and belief "that our MUTUAL WELLBEING depends on rebuilding social solidarity."

That is good stuff. If we're paying any attention at all, there are countless examples – around the world, in this country, in and around Philadelphia – of organizations and ordinary people coming together, working together, in big and small ways, for the sake of the common good. Common good not just for people but the earth itself because, of course, OF COURSE, there is no common without the planet.

Cooperatives of all kinds come to mind, like Mariposa down the street from Calvary – consumer, worker, producer, service, housing cooperatives, you name it. "B" corporations committed to a triple bottom line that includes social and environmental impacts, beyond just financial gain, as the measure of success.

The list goes on, thankfully and hopefully. But that work, of course, as we all know all too well through the politicization of the pandemic, is very much playing out in the context of deep and increasing polarization and division within our shared political, civic and cultural life. And playing out, perpetually, within the ongoing and destructive capitalist context that fuels competition over cooperation, elevates individualism over interdependence, and prioritizes profit over the well being of people and the planet.

Personal freedom, security, privilege and wealth are kings, and we are all socialized accordingly. Our society is structured, on the whole, toward self-centered tunnel vision – actually making it difficult to give time and energy to concern and care beyond ourselves and perhaps our families.

And so the common good – prioritizing, pursuing and practicing the common good – remains profoundly countercultural.

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;" writes the apostle Paul, in his letter to the early Christian community in Corinth, "and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." The common good.

As countercultural then as it is now, as Jesus' life and death made clear enough. That is covenantal thinking!

We have varieties of gifts, of course, thanks be to God! And those gifts – Paul reminds us – are, in fact, the manifestation of God's Spirit working in us, evidence of the divine presence within each of us. In our difference, in the diversity of our giftedness, is blessing.

But that's not all. Those gifts, as Paul also reminds us, are meant to serve the common good. The common good is not possible without the diversity of gifts we all bring.

Now there are many working definitions of the "common good" – here's one: "the good proper TO, and attainable only BY, the community, yet individually shared by its members." Again, the common good can only be achieved in community. By community. When we come together in love, not pull away from each other in fear.

And of course, what the common good ACTUALLY IS ultimately has to be defined in SPECIFIC context. And Lord knows it is hard, hard work, but holy work, in specific communities, neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, cities, regions, countries, to figure out and agree on what the common good is. And make it happen.

That work is on full display in the case brought seven years ago, and now, finally, being argued before the Commonwealth Court, against the state of Pennsylvania on behalf of six poorer school districts, including the William Penn School District where Gabe goes to school in Delaware County, seven public-school parents, the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools and the NAACP Pennsylvania State Conference.

Arguing for compliance with the state constitution to ensure that ALL students receive access to high-quality public education. And the case, as you may have read or heard, during which John Krill, an attorney for Republican State Senator Jake Corman, had the AUDACITY to ask the superintendent of a rural school district, who had just highlighted his students' poor standardized test scores in biology and Algebra as evidence that his district lacks the resources it needs, "What use would someone on the McDonald's career track have for Algebra I?"

Making his case, the state's case, that some students do not need or deserve quality education in their public schools because it's apparently in the best interest of the state – it's for the common good of the state, if you will – to have plenty of workers to fill low-wage service jobs.

As if the good of the state is not tied to the good of its people! Friends, the common good is literally on trial as we speak, but let's be clear: We fall short of both common and good as long as low-wage, non-living-wage jobs are deemed necessary.

As Gandhi said, echoing Jesus the countercultural, socialist revolutionary, "the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." We are called, all of us, to draw the circle wide, to keep drawing it wider until its as wide as it needs to be for everyone and everything to be included.

To continually stretch, as we prayed earlier, our understanding of who's included in the commons. To stretch beyond narrow self-absorption and self-seeking to the spaciousness and abundance of common good. To make use of, and restore as needed, our peripheral vision so that we more consistently see the world as widely and inclusively and justly as God does.

That is the holy, hard work to which we are all called, at one level or another. Continually prioritizing the common good, centering the questions for ourselves and within the communities of which we are a part: What is the common good, and how am I using, how can I use, my gifts to serve it? How are we, collectively, using our gifts to serve the common good?

And those questions are, and our answers to them, must be firmly rooted in awareness and embrace of our universal interdependence. The many ways we depend on each other, the many ways we need each other. And the earth.

The common good depends on our practice of community-building, cooperatively sharing the diverse gifts we – each of us, all of us, all of creation – bring to it.

That is the point of Paul's description of the so-called "body of Christ" – as he goes on to describe in this letter to the Corinthians, and as we'll consider further next week as part of our Service of Healing & Wholeness.

"But God has so arranged the body, . . . that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

We all have different gifts and functions. That is a good thing. But the body can only be truly, fully healthy if each party is working with, not against, every other part. Our physical bodies remind us of that truth all the time, amen?!

Paul's words echo the prophet Jeremiah: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

And both Paul and Jeremiah are echoed in Dr. King's well known "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" – written nearly 60 years ago this April. From his prison cell. On the margins of the local newspaper over the course of four days. In response to white clergy, both Christian and Jewish, who had asked him to delay demonstrations begun nine days earlier as part of a long-term, nonviolent direct action campaign protesting the city's racist segregation laws.

Allow me to play just an excerpt of King reading that letter.

([youtube.com/watch?v=Di05SvJ8utI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Di05SvJ8utI) – 1:45-4:29)

That feels like as good a way to wrap up as any, as we honor again King's legacy and the many thousands of others who pushed and continue to push us, even against and across deep difference and division, even in the face of sometimes violent resistance, toward the COMMON good. Toward justice, and the peace and prosperity that goes with it. That is our work to do, operating from love, not fear. Together.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Many gifts connected by one Spirit, in covenant with each other.

So what does, what might, pursuit of the common good like for you, wherever you live or work or study? What does, what might, that look like for our Calvary congregation, in this community, in Philadelphia and beyond?

Friends, affirming our interdependence and the deep truth that we belong to each other, may we keep our eyes and ears, our hearts and our hands, squarely focused on the hard, but holy, work of fostering mutual wellbeing. Social and ecological solidarity. The kind of goodness we can all enjoy together. In common. As God intends.

Thanks be to God. May it be so.