

Keeping the Common Good, Good

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, 33-34

If you've kept up with recent events, you'll know that things are not so quiet and cordial in our beloved America the beautiful. Every day there seems to be an alarming crisis arising out of (or directed back at) our nation's capital. It's gotten so crazy over the past month that Russians have even taken up to parking their spy ships off our coastline, not for intelligence gathering as reported, but for piping in 24-hour entertainment! With the Oscars just around the corner, American political theatre has covered all the categories: horror in Europe, drama in China, and comedy in Moscow!

While I was pondering the week's news and developments, I came across a quote from a writer (a Baptist, it turns out!), who offered a critical assessment of what lies at the heart of many American social problems:

Any shifting of the economic equilibrium from one class to another is sure to be followed by a shifting of the political equilibrium...A class which is economically strong will have the necessary influence to secure and enforce laws which protect its economic interests. In turn, a class which controls legislation will shape it for its own enrichment. Politics is embroidered with patriotic sentiment and phrases, but at bottom, consciously or unconsciously, the economic interests dominate it always. If therefore we have a class which owns a large part of the national wealth and controls nearly all the mobile part of it, it is idle to suppose that this class will not see to it that the vast power exerted by the machinery of government serves its interests. And if we have another class which is economically dependent and helpless, it is idle to suppose that it will be allowed an equal voice in swaying political power. In short, we cannot join economic inequality and political equality. As Oliver Cromwell wrote to Parliament, "If there be any one that makes many poor to make a few rich, that suits not a Commonwealth." The words of Lincoln find a new application here, that the republic cannot be half slave and half free.¹

He goes on:

Individual sympathy and understanding has been our chief reliance in the past for overcoming the differences between the social classes. The feelings and

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1907, pp. 253-4.

principles implanted by Christianity have been a powerful aid in that direction. But if this sympathy diminishes by the widening of the social chasm, what hope have we? ²

What's fascinating to me about this perspective was that it was written over one hundred years ago by Walter Rauschenbusch, who was commenting on the American social and economic landscape of his times.

If you compare the late 19th and early 20th centuries with ours and identify the issues over which the country was split, the complaints will sound quite similar: a widening gap between the uber-rich and everyone else, government waste, political corruption, taxes too high, decay in the urban centers, the threat from immigration, the growth of sectarian religious movements, alcoholism and drug addiction, rising crime, and the like. Except, in the early twentieth century, the anger was directed at Catholic immigrants from southern Europe and Jews from eastern Europe, accused of taking jobs away from God-fearing white Protestants. American churches themselves were in partisan conflict, with the evangelical churches on the political right fighting what they saw as the undermining of the traditional faith by modern science, socialist ideas, and the erudite liberal establishment. Preachers on each side of the theological divide would pound their pulpits demonizing one another.

Rauschenbusch, himself, who was the chief architect of the Social Gospel movement, pastored a German Baptist church in the “Hell’s Kitchen” neighborhoods on the westside of Manhattan, where he recognized how out-of-touch the pietistic tradition had become with the horrors of poverty and widespread prejudice against immigrants, rendering the teachings of Christ as irrelevant to the looming social crises. Later, while a professor at Rochester Theological Seminary, Rauschenbusch wrote

² Ibid., pg. 252.

his seminal work, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, analyzing the problems in American society through the lens of Jesus' prophetic witness. At the heart of it was how often Jesus addressed, in one way or another, the importance of cultivating social trust between people. Without the bonds of trust in society, the world begins to unravel; fostering trust through a transformed spirit and a renewed heart for humanity, with justice, fairness, and mutual care and compassion building a strong and benevolent society, i.e., the very realm of God that Jesus envisioned and proclaimed.

The greatest contribution which any [one] can make to the social movement is the contribution of a regenerated personality, of a will which sets justice above policy and profit, and of an intellect emancipated from falsehood. Such a man will in some measure incarnate the principles of a higher social order in his attitude to all questions and in all his relations...and will be a well-spring of regenerating influences. If he speaks, his judgment will be a corrective force. If he listens, he will encourage the truth-teller and discourage the peddler of adulterated facts and maxims. If others lose heart, he will stay them with his inspired patience...[Those] of faith are the living spirits, the channels by which new truth and power from God enter humanity.³

Suffice to say, Rauschenbusch could be stirring voice for our times, as well.

Frankly, America today is not much different in its fundamental social character and religious battles than it was 100-150 years ago. When you ponder what that means, and what the 20th century later delivered in terms of national and global horrors, you quickly realize that the insecurities people feel are rooted, not in a weak military or border, but instead in the loss of social trust between people. We've cultivated the fears we now own, instead of the trust that would build stronger relationships and bridge the gulf between friends, neighbors, strangers, foreigners, and enemies. Fear fosters the sense of threat, even when it doesn't exist. The lessons of this past century ought to remind us that we must rise to a higher moral and ethical plane or else we will repeat the same destructive patterns

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-52.

of the past. We will not secure the common good if the good that's in human beings is not cultivated to be common.

In many ways, the relevancy of Jesus' teachings to Rauschenbusch's times is no different than it is to ours—something we explore on a regular basis. But we can go further back into history to the moral laws, principles, and values that helped shape many of Jesus' teachings found in ancient Israel.

Today's text from Leviticus is a good example of cultivating social trust—an ethical and moral perspective that developed over time after many abuses and destructive influences had left their impact. Two, in particular, that became significant for ancient Israel spoke to the realities of Jesus' day, and, as well, are relevant to us today: 1) the ways that greed, power, and inequality divide the commonwealth of a people and undermine its sense of social trust; 2) the way that migration from one place to another fundamentally defines everyone's story and identity, including in well-established communities and tribes. In short, we're all the products of immigration. In Leviticus, it comes as a mandate to share fairly and mercifully the resources you have and remember that your people were once alien and foreigners to this land. Those two commandments and all the related imperatives are foundational to a just and prosperous society from ancient times to the present.

You may have noticed how Leviticus 19 echoes Exodus 20, the chapter where Moses comes down from Sinai and reveals the Ten Commandments. Except in Leviticus, it's more of a midrash that expands on what the earlier tradition laid out—providing instructions based, we have to assume, on abuses and injustices that actually played out in daily life and had to be corrected.

So, to landowners (land being the basis for most wealth), whose crops were harvested to sell in the marketplace by employing cheap labor, they were called out to take care of the very ones they exploited, who didn't own land and had to forage food wherever they could find it. Instead of charging those who could not afford it in the marketplace, they were to allow them to glean the fields, the produce and fruit, so they could survive.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare...you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.

The common good wasn't defined as the rich man's right to his fortune; it was the care of everyone in society—those who had means were to be merciful and share with those who lacked them, even if they weren't native to the soil. It was a social ethic of charity, but as Levitical law, it was a matter of divine justice.

The same was true of the commandments not to steal or bear false witness. Powerful, influential people had all sorts of devices to get around the laws and many others found ways to cheat the system. So in Leviticus, a reminder: “You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning...” which was a way of avoiding to pay them at all. In other words, the typical ways that employers could cheat their laborers out of a fair wage was outlawed. In this same chapter, there were rules and regulations for not having dishonest scales, weights, and measures in their business transactions. I find this interesting against the backdrop of those who claim that an unfettered, unregulated market is ideal—God-willed even—overlooking the fact that workplace rules and marketplace constraints are actually ancient and biblical! They were in place to protect vulnerable people from abuse and fraud in the marketplace. It was for the common

good. They may impact personal profits, but accountability and justice build social trust.

Leviticus 19 also came down on those who would mock or ridicule those with physical challenges, such as hearing loss or impaired vision. So, a provision was put in place to outlaw mistreatment toward the vulnerable.

Then, regarding social relations, bias or bigotry also were not to enter into judgments about others—fairness, not slander, were called for. If you remember, Jesus pushed it even further in the Sermon on the Mount. No one was to pass judgment upon another without first addressing their own sins and shortcomings (remove the log out of your own eye before you cite the sawdust in another!). Do not judge another, lest you will be judged in similar fashion.

Taking all of this into the family and community:

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin...you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

This, of course, is chapter and verse Jesus raised to the same moral emphasis and significance as the Shema—the great commandment to love God with all one's heart, soul, strength, and mind. For Jesus, there were two greatest commandments—love God and love your neighbor. For Leviticus it was limited to tribal relations—loving your neighbor and kinfolk; Jesus, however, expanded it to a universal ethic, as all are given life and loved by God.

Interestingly, this expanded—even universal—grace is hinted at later in Leviticus 19:

When an alien [or immigrant] resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien [immigrant] who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were [foreigners] in the land of Egypt...

Immigrants were to be treated like citizens because the Israelites themselves were once foreigners in Egypt. Do to others as you would want done to yourself. The common good applies to everyone who lives within the reaches of one's life. Building social trust is the common good—as important as loving God.

I find great irony over how many people in our country today boast about being religious and faithful to the Bible, but somehow are quite myopic when it comes to the content of its teachings. Building social trust, protecting the immigrant, and holding the powerful and wealthy accountable to the common good aren't "progressive" values—they are ancient values, biblical values, even *conservative* values!

As Rauschenbusch pointed out, working in the neighborhoods of "Hell's Kitchen" a century ago, are we not called to raise the standards of our society to care for the least of these, to follow the teachings of Scripture and the example of Jesus—to build social trust and protect and save those who are most vulnerable, those who are marginalized, and those who are mistreated? Are we not in a similar situation, at least in terms of how we treat and view one another? Is there not a moral foundation to our society that underscores, if not anchors, our legal sense of what is best for the common good in society?

Economic justice and political accountability doesn't limit anyone's freedom, except for what they do with their freedom to harm others, selfishly, unjustly, and mercilessly. It applies to citizens and non-citizens. It applies to those we like and those we don't like. It is the basis for what we consider the common *good*—the manner in which we treat each other, which helps us share our *commonwealth*.

All of this was relevant to ancient Israel thousands of years ago. It was equally relevant in the times of Jesus. It has been relevant in many contexts down through the ages. It was clearly relevant a century ago when American “Robber Barons” were oppressing much of the population. It is prophetically relevant to us in these critical times, as we seek to preserve the common good in a society that is deeply divided.

Philosopher Adam Smith famously said, “Individual ambition serves the common good.” He was right, ambition does serve the common good. Ambition has inspired the entrepreneurial spirit in this country and made us into a prosperous and productive nation. But any free-market economic philosophy fails when it misses the equally important and corrective corollary: freedom, without constraint, is merely the license to exploit. That will not serve the common good. Social trust is what ultimately serves the common good, certainly more than individual ambition or personal freedom. This is a lesson humanity has had to learn time and time again. May we remember it in these times for the sake of our biblical faith and for the common good of all.

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