

## ***Gifts of Common Good and Grace***

**I Corinthians 12:4-13**

When the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Fitzgerald Kennedy was recognized last Monday on Memorial Day, for many the confluence of honoring those who had died in our nation's battles and the memory of one of the great Presidents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seemed both appropriate and reminiscent of a time when service to one's country was expected of just about everyone. The quote that inspired a generation came in JFK's inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask, rather, what you can do for your country." We know it well.

For a generation shaped by those times, this reflected the noble call to service, not just the pursuit of one's own personal ambition or happiness. It's premised on a belief that we live in a society that calls for each person to contribute to their best ability to the betterment of the commonwealth from which they benefit and are a part. For Kennedy, it wasn't just about serving in the military as his generation had done so valiantly through World War II and the Korean conflict; more significantly, it was in fostering the ideals of democracy and moral character in nonmilitary roles—in the soon-to-be-established Peace Corps and VISTA program addressing the War on Poverty, in the scientific race to the moon, and in uplifting the dignity and value of human lives which for so long had been oppressed by racism, sexism, and social ills. When Kennedy became President, the country seemed poised to take on the problems of American society and the world with optimism for the future, with youthful vigor and vision, and a united commitment for the common good. Or so it seemed.

Many remember the early 1960s, idealistic as they appear to be at this point. My three brothers and I grew up during this time and were

influenced by many of its lofty ideals and vexing problems. Though I was in my childhood, what I've held onto without reservation are the values of human equality and social responsibility that were lionized, perhaps even more than personal freedom and unlimited opportunity, which lie at the heart of the American mantra we've heard more often in recent decades. In looking back, though, equality and social responsibility were paramount because that served the larger good and it's also what you experienced in the typical household, as I did in mine.

In my upbringing, every child had equal standing, including responsibility for household chores and for taking care of personal belongings and space. We lived with hand-me-downs and shared rooms, so there rarely was any sense of individuality or privileged status. We occupied our free time playing games together or pick-up sports after school; we attended church and sang in the choirs without option; our family meals occurred routinely at 6:00 p.m. every evening, where each one had a role in set-up or clean-up. If you didn't care for what everyone else was doing, or even if you didn't like the food on the table, you made do and joined in because that was what was expected. It was just the way things were done. The collective interests were more important than individual desires. That was typical of American households when John Kennedy was alive.

My upbringing shaped my eventual outlook on life as an adult and how I figure things should be. I am more oriented toward the common good than I am satisfying every personal whim and desire. At the same time, inherently I will trust people because I was reared with it and experienced trust. By nature, I look for the good in others and assume people will respond with courtesy and decency. I expect everyone will pitch

in when something needs to be done; I also presume fairness because that is what I was taught and what I've tried to practice. None of these I consider moral virtues as much as they are normal expectations when you are oriented toward the common good, which is ultimately what's best for everyone, if it isn't demeaning, oppressive, or unjust or unfair to those in the minority.

In 2017, it appears the common good isn't quite as common as I once thought it was. A few years ago, Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners community in Washington D.C., wrote a brief editorial in *Time Magazine* asking this very question: "Whatever Happened to the 'Common Good'?"<sup>1</sup> His complaint echoed what many have noted in our current political climate—that bitter partisanship has made it virtually impossible for people to work together on problems that are common to us all. The common good, Wallis remarked, isn't going left or right, but going *deeper* than the surface differences to focus on what needs to be addressed.

This has always been the better sense of "common good"—to go beyond differences to forge something that will work for the most people or that will result in the most beneficial future for society. A basic definition of "common good" is: "that which benefits society as a whole, in contrast to the private good of individuals and sections of society."<sup>2</sup> Since the time of Aristotle, philosophers have debated what constituted the common good or how to achieve it, but it has always involved placing the welfare of the community above the individual, the collective benefits above those for that are considered personal, and the public interests above private ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Wallis, "Whatever Happened to the 'Common Good'?" *Time*, April 4, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Britannica Online Dictionary.

Often, it isn't easy to determine what is best for all, but for thousands of years in Western political philosophy, it's been acknowledged that unless people invest enough concern and input into the decision-making process, the common good will be subject to control by private interests. That's one reason the ancient Greeks promoted democracy (though they limited it to citizens, who were educated, land-owning males); that said, the civic duty of each citizen was to serve the whole—the *polis*, which was the larger community or country. In the past three centuries, democracy has risen to be the preferred form of governance in many nations around the world. However, in our current times, there's a more-globalized sense of *polis*, where the “common good” is what serves the broadest welfare of the world, not just the perceived interests of an individual or powerful country.

In any case, I want to bring our attention to our text for today. However the common good is identified, I believe the traditional sense of it is readily apparent in the early Pauline communities and particularly in his theology of the Spirit. I don't think this is by accident, since the Apostle Paul, of all the New Testament writers and leaders, would have been well-versed in Greek philosophy and their notions of citizen empowerment, which may have shaped his thinking. Except, for Paul, his ecclesiology was more of a “spiritual democracy”, where the Holy Spirit empowered individual believers with specific gifts that were to serve the common good, i.e., for strengthening Christian community with an awareness and presence of God. As we read, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*”

As far as I can tell, this was a radically new interpretation among Jewish and early Christian leaders of how the Spirit of God was manifest in the world, even though the Prophet Joel had hinted at this, proclaiming

that in the last days God would pour out the Spirit upon all flesh (2:28, 29). Prior to this, the Spirit of God would have been known to merely anoint certain kings and leaders, instead of entire communities. For early Christians, Jesus would have been one so anointed by God.

Paul, however, likely was inspired by Joel's image and theologically portrayed the early churches as fulfilling that prophecy by being anointed by the same Spirit that was in Jesus; this likely explains why Paul referred to them as the *body of Christ*, i.e., in their collective presence, they were manifesting the same anointing, the same Spirit and purpose and presence as Jesus. Luke, the writer of both the Gospel and Acts and a close confidant and companion of Paul, reflected this same theology in his reference to Jesus' anointing at this baptism by John and later, in the description and explanation of Pentecost, where the Spirit came upon each one enabling them to hear the gospel in their own tongue—a clear reflection of the Apostles' mission around the known world.

For Paul himself, as we see in Romans 12 and in I Corinthians 12, the Spirit was manifest in Christian community in the gifts bestowed upon members, not for their personal edification and enhancement as some wanted, but principally for the common good—to strengthen and enhance the witness of the whole community. The presence of God would be experienced through the gifts of the Spirit which gave each believer a role, responsibility, and purpose in serving the common good.

Now, what was the “common good” in the Pauline communities? It was in their shared ambition to live in the manner and spirit of Jesus, bearing witness to his Gospel proclamation to bring God's realm to earth. In practical terms, it was evident in the physical wellbeing of each member of the community, where like a family, meals were shared and resources

were disbursed as each one had need, as we see referred to in Acts 2 and 4. It was also evident in the loving manner in which people treated each other, eloquently expressed in the “love poem” of I Corinthians 13, and in “the fruit of the Spirit”—expressions of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As the hymn goes, “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love.”

Equally significant, the Spirit was apparent in the various gifts that were inspired for the common good, expressed through wisdom, knowledge, teaching, leadership, administration, merciful deeds, effective prayer, building up faith in others, discernment, healing, caregiving, and so forth. Even the reference to speaking in tongues, along with interpretation, were ecstatic manifestations of the Spirit that were to serve the betterment of all—perhaps with revelatory insights in given situations or simply to express deep inward joy of God’s inspiration (it might require experience as a Pentecostal to fully understand this!). Note, however, Paul’s rebuke (I Cor. 14) of those who were reveling in speaking in tongues without any interpretation for others clearly shows he didn’t consider the gifts of the Spirit for anything other than the common good. It wasn’t to feed the ego, as if some people were more spirit-filled than others; it was for common insight and benefit, otherwise useless. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*”

Why is the common good so important? Because that’s where God is found. It is in community with others where self-serving interests are held in check and accountable to a larger pool of interests. It’s in community where people express and experience in real and meaningful terms the reality of justice and love. Justice on an individual basis normally addresses personal interests—the perspective is limited and attention is

given mainly to concerns relevant to each person. Justice in community means serving the welfare of others, not just oneself.

And what about love? Love by its nature is social—it's not something that grows or flourishes in isolation. Love is a circle of grace and mercy extended to others, who then reciprocate and return love in kind. Love is experienced in relationships and community. If God is love, it only follows that to sense God, one must experience loving relationships—one must be in community with others.

With this emphasis on community and the common good, it doesn't surprise me there isn't much in the Bible which affirms individualism—the type we so often see in American Christianity, particularly Protestant forms of it. The crazy libertarian, isolating ideology that permeates our culture ends up distorting so much of what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about, which is, to be in perfect relation with God and with others and create a world that reflects this. Our individuality only matters when we are in relationship with others who appreciate us for who we are when everyone does their part for the common good. The realm of God is not a collection of autonomous atoms; it is a deeply satisfying community of interdependent and diverse relationships, who in a collective way and synergistic manner represent the fullness of God on earth. It's for serving a common good—a peaceable, healthy planet.

That, my friends, is the vision of Pentecost—where the Spirit of God dwells in us and among us, expressed in gifts of common good and grace.

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