

**Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, January 17, 2016**  
**Text: I Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11**

# The Common Good



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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Many gifts, one Spirit. There are people who play instruments, who sing, who read, pray, and preach, people who usher, work the sound and projection systems, who welcome at the door, people who make coffee at 8:00 am, provide food and serve it in the Fellowship Hall, who teach, clean up, promote green theology, plan a lecture series, champion the mission of the United Methodist Women, and people who plan, who administer, who donate money, who count money, who spend money in accord with the budget, who send messages, answer phones, and people who stock the food pantry, serve the Wednesday breakfast, and love the unloved. There are many gifts, all given by one Spirit, the spirit of God's love, for one purpose, to serve the common good.

It all adds up. When we held our annual Church Conference on December 20<sup>th</sup>, we elected a roster of nine members to serve as a Governing Board, and a number of people to serve on standing committees. And we agreed to another set of task groups that would be appointed to oversee essential functions of our life together as a congregation. And then on the last page of the report we saw an estimate of the number of people involved in the day-to-day ministry of the church . . . how many people are involved in the music ministry, in guiding the Sunday School and the youth program, how many are involved in the food pantry and outreach program, those working on racial issues, the environment, lay theological education, a long, long list of efforts made by this congregation to live out its faith in real terms, and the total was over 900.

Nine-hundred . . . that is more than our number of members. That shows that many of us are involved in multiple aspects of our ministry, and also that there are many people who are not formally members who are doing the work of the church. A sign of a church's strength is not how many members it has but how many people participate in the ministry.

Many gifts, one Spirit, all to be offered to enhance the common good. The apostle Paul was writing that message to the first generation church in Corinth. Even at the very start Paul sees that people within the Christian community have a tendency to develop a hierarchy of gifts, claiming some as more valuable than others, and their gifts just happen to be at the top of the list. He writes, "No, all gifts are important when they are offered to the faith community. Wisdom, knowledge, devotion, healing, insight, vision, interpretation . . . they all contribute to the common good. Share them in that way. We can do more good corporately than individually."

It often is the case that our greatest strength also is our greatest weakness. I think that one of my strengths is to come up with new ideas, how things might work, making connections between things that at first seem unrelated. I can get excited about coming up with new possibilities. But I have seen that look around the table directed at me that says, "Phil, quiet! We are about to decide among choices A, B, and C. Just simmer down and let us make a decision." And I am bouncing up and down in my chair, wanting to say, "But take a look at D, E, and F; and some of our best decisions have come when we have considered G, H, and I."

When a strength becomes a weakness, when a gift becomes a burden . . . that is where the community enters in. Often the group can make better use of our individual gifts than we can on our own. Sometimes a word of correction or caution makes what we have to offer even more valuable.

I remember during the year I spent in the British Methodist Church attending circuit meetings where all nine congregations were represented by lay stewards, and Doug Hartland would get up and say to John Pruitt, "I say this in Christian love, brother . . ." and then he would offer a pointed criticism. But it was offered in genuine Christian love, and that kept the focus on the common good, not certain personalities. It was a more colloquial form of Oliver Cromwell's message to the Church of Scotland in 1650, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken." The center of human emotion was considered the bowels before it migrated up to the heart, but the point is: within the community of faith we occupy the role of shaping each other's contributions to serve the common good. When the leader of the armed squatters on public land out in Oregon says that he is doing it because God told him to, someone representing the faith community needs to say, "Think it possible that you may be mistaken. It does not look like Christian behavior that enhances the common good."

The "common good" . . . Paul uses that term to identify the purpose of the congregation, which is to coordinate all of the individual gifts to serve the good of the whole. But it is not a term restricted only to the life of the faith community. It also refers to the purpose of the congregation in the midst of public life. This congregation has enshrined it simply in its motto: "Downtown for Good." That is not a badge of honor that we pin on ourselves, not a matter of self-congratulation; rather, it is a commitment to faithful engagement of the world, of this world.

Why did Jesus turn water into wine? Yes, because his mother told him to, but beyond that? He did not do it as a parlor trick, as a way of drawing attention to himself, or as a way of proving his divinity, though John the gospel writer uses the miracle for that theological purpose. No, it seems that Jesus is reluctant to do it, and when he does it he is out of sight in the back room where the wine casks are stored. His purpose, casting it in terms of our theme today, is to serve the common good. The reputation of the hosts is on the line. It would be a terrible loss of face in an honor culture to run out of wine while all of the guests are celebrating the marriage. Jesus engages in a generous act of support of the family in a crisis which would otherwise have led to profound public humiliation.

Incidentally, that is not a gift any of us learned in seminary, turning water into wine. Setting up an 8-foot table by oneself, yes, but not turning water into wine. For our purposes today, let us see this act as a gift only Jesus could give to the common good.

We know of the Boston Commons. In New Haven where I spent some time, there is the New Haven Green at the heart of the city, a large public space created, it was said, to accommodate all 144,000 people who are to be saved when Jesus returns. It is a large space, as you might imagine, but how all 144,000 would make it to New Haven in time for the apocalypse was never explained.

Here in Madison we have “The Square,” just a block away surrounding the State Capitol building, the center of much of the public life of this city. It is the tethering point of the downtown, that part of our “Downtown for Good.” It is our opportunity, even more, our obligation to take our gifts to the public square . . . our sense of serving the needs of all, especially the neediest in our midst, our sense of the downtown developing into a residential neighborhood, our devotion to the arts and music of the city, our location as a spiritual center, our alternative vision of what serves the common good contrasted to much of what is said and done on, and around, The Square. How can we witness to God’s demand that all people be served by the decisions leaders make, not just some, that all people flourish, not only a few, that when the tide comes in all boats in the harbor rise, not just the yachts? (Bill Coffin’s line).

Two examples . . . in this election year there is a continuing effort in our state to enforce restrictive rules on voting. Back in the early 1980’s Paul Weyrich, a political operative of The Moral Majority, a hyper-reactionary political movement with a religious overtone, in preparing for a national election, said, “I don’t want everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of the people. They never have been from the beginning of our country and they are not now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.” (“People for the American Way” website) That cynical spirit of Paul Weyrich, who was from Racine and worked for the Milwaukee Sentinel, haunts the hallways of the State Capitol, and we need to counter it.

A second example where human flourishing is not a common experience for all . . . public education in Wisconsin. Today Wisconsin ranks worst in the nation in the difference between how well black and white students perform, in the likelihood that black students will be suspended from school, and in the difference between black and white graduation rates. Racial bias? Yes, of course, but it is more than that. 49% of black school children in Wisconsin live in poverty. The loss of jobs, a shift in the kind of jobs available, the incarceration of black males, the segregation of neighborhoods, and thereby public schools, all are factors. (WisconsinWatch.org)

We cannot be downtown for good and not heed God’s call for us to use all of our gifts for the common good to challenge this unholy complex of contributing factors. We are working on a Lenten emphasis which we will solidify very soon that will include tutoring of public school children by our members, an evening series of discussions about what will bridge the gaps within our city, and attempts to lend our voice to a still muted call to make fundamental changes.

Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. I remember vividly the day that he was assassinated, April 4, 1968. It was a Thursday in Lent, and I, as the seminary intern, had gone with the choir of our white church from Seymour down the Naugatuck River valley to the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Ansonia. The two choirs were to have supper together and then sing at a joint service in preparation for Holy Week. At 6:05 pm Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and killed while he stood on the balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. We all, black and white eating together and then worshiping together, were stricken with grief.

On Easter Sunday, ten days later, our celebration of the Resurrection at the Methodist Church in Seymour was enveloped by the horror of the assassination. After church I went to have dinner with a family, a routine expectation of a seminarian serving a congregation. It was an extended family who had gathered, about twenty people in all, representing three generations. After I offered grace, my price of inclusion to be at the family table, they began to talk about the assassination. They were jubilant. “It’s about time somebody got that Communist agitator,” one of them said, and all agreed. The talk around the table continued in that vein, and I was petrified, intimidated, stunned, mute. I did not say a word. I sat there, tears in my eyes, looking down at my plate, eating as fast as I could, not paying any attention to what I was eating, and left as quickly as I could.

I got back to my room at the seminary that afternoon, defeated. Why did I not say a word? Why did I not stand up, throw down my fork, condemn them all, and leave? I sat and stared at the wall into the night, began to feel sick to my stomach, and ultimately was driven to my knees, not by prayer, but by a bay leaf. I had eaten the bay leaf out of the mashed potatoes, and I found out that human digestive systems cannot handle bay leaves. But it also drove me to my knees to wretch over my own wretchedness. From that moment I promised never to be silenced again, never.

The common good . . . that is the reason why we are gifted people, the reason we are the Church. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision of the common good, the dream that he had, is still ours today. It includes all of us, a common dream. “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together . . . “ It is a dream that challenges the injustice of Mississippi and the racism of Alabama. It is a

dream that sees his own four children one day living in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

It is a dream of biblical proportions where one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

“All flesh shall see it together,” the common good, the universality of human flourishing. It is a dream that he had for us all the way from the East to the West and from the South to the North, even, we must now see, a dream for Wisconsin.

The dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., gives vision to God’s purpose. It is a dream not yet realized, a purpose not yet served. But it is our reason for being, for being downtown for good, and when freedom rings from every city and hamlet, from every state and region, from every house of worship and the domain of every race and creed, then we will all sing, “Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, We are free at last.” Amen.