

“Building up the common good”

January 23, 2011

Text: Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Matthew 4:17-25

I.

Today is CROP WALK recruitment Sunday in our church, our annual walk to raise funds to combat world hunger. It’s a time, therefore, when we pause and remember the poor, the hungry, the destitute and the downtrodden. It is an occasion when we are reminded of the basic inequities of life, of the divide that persists between the *haves* and the *have nots*.

And it’s a time, as well, when we step back from our busyness; from all our weekly commitments—from all of our *stuff*—and we remember the vision God has for God’s creation ... which is also the theme verse for our *United Church of Christ* denomination: ***That they may all be one***, from John 17:21.

And in our remembering today—of what the Bible calls *the least of these*—the ones who each day do without the basic necessities of life—we remember again that all of life is HOLY.

Food itself is holy because it is food that gives life to our bodies, which are the *temple of the spirit* ... which is the life-force God has breathed into creation.

As the child of *depression era* parents, I remember, growing up, how we were always expected to finish the food on our plate. In fact, in grade school, in the food program for lunch, we received these blue stars—every day—for cleaning up our plate. I remember struggling some days to make sure I got my blue star. In particular, I remember my first relationship with sauerkraut.

Food is holy, therefore, because life is holy. And we honor the holiness of life by doing what we can—every day—to build up the common good.

Building up the common good is what we, as Christians and human beings, are supposed to do with our lives. And the good news is: everybody can do something.

II.

One of the ongoing questions of life, which always hovers over us, is: ***what are we going to do?*** *What are we going to do*, in a whole range of contexts??

1. With the economy faltering, for example. Jobs are scarce ... enthusiasm for investments is on life-support. *What are we going to do?*

2. In my career ... for my financial future and the long-term financial security of my family. *What are we going to do?*
3. With the recent, tragic violence in Arizona ... and the violence here in Miami just a few days ago, *what are we going to do?* With regard to gun laws and the violence in our communities. Again, *what am I going to do*
4. And our challenge today around world hunger. What do we do? Always, that's the question.

Although we tend to think of poverty and all of its symptoms as existing in some distant land ... in East Africa or parts of Asia, for example; or in areas in Central America ... certainly in Haiti, we have poverty—too—right here in the United States.

Check out these numbers from only a few years back:

- 36 million people living below the poverty line ...
- 47 million people without health insurance ...
- 2 million households declaring bankruptcy ...

Again, *what are we going to do?*

III.

In our reading from Matthew 4, when Jesus begins his ministry, proclaiming, ***Repent, for the kingdom of God is near***, this is—of course—good news. And soon Jesus comes across the brothers, Peter and Andrew, who are fishermen. He sees them casting their nets into the sea ... and he says to them *Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*.

Okay, well enough! As Anglican bishop and Bible scholar, N.T Wright notes, *these teachings are not about how to go to heaven ... or about how to escape from this world into eternity*. In other words, they're NOT about some *future salvation*.

Follow me and I will teach you to fish for people.

They're a call, rather, to contemporary action to *fish for human beings*. They're a call to help your brother and your sister—down the street ... across town ... around the world, wherever they might be.

This is what Jesus did. But look what *fishing for human beings* meant for him.

According to Matthew 4, ***Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the GOOD NEWS of the kingdom AND curing every disease and every sickness among the people.***

So his fame spread ... and they brought to him all the sick, those afflicted with various disease and pain ... and he cured them.

The point is, in Jesus' reaching out to people with God's love, in each instance, he responds to the needs of the total person. That's what **building up the common good** means. And that's what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus: to do *what* we can, *as often* as we can ... *wherever* it is that we live out our lives ... to **build up the common good**.

IV.

Typically, when we start talking about *global problems*, like world hunger, easily we get discouraged. We get discouraged because—understandably—it seems too big ... out of control ... unmanageable. How can we possibly make a difference?

A few years back, TIME Magazine named **Bill and Melinda Gates**, along with U2 star **Bono**, Persons of the Year for all the work they had done to ease human suffering around the world, particularly in Africa and other Third World nations.

In one of his songs, Bono protests against the world's often-times too flippant calls for *justice for all AND peace on earth*.

The verse in one of his songs goes ...

I'm sick of all this hanging around ... sick of sorrow, sick of pain; I'm sick of hearing again and again that there's gonna be peace on earth.

Okay, fair enough. To whatever extent, we can identify. We want to know: When are we going to something about it? Once again, the question lingers: *What are we gonna do?*

Deuteronomy knows. CHECK IT OUT!

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community ... do not be hard-hearted or tight fisted towards your needy neighbor. Rather, open your hand, says Deuteronomy, and *willingly lend enough to meet the need, whatever it may be*.

BUILDING UP THE COMMON GOOD is what the Bible teaches, again and again. And **building up the common good** has everything to do with *neighbor love*.

The *common good*, of course, has a universal ring to it. It includes everyone. No one is excluded. *Open your hand in generosity*, says Deuteronomy, and **God will bless you** in more ways than you'll ever know.

Building up the common good is a powerful vision for the world. It moves us beyond the fences that we like to erect. It moves us beyond the borders we like to draw up ... where we isolate ourselves from others, by religion, ethnicity or race.

Through love and compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness, **building up the common good** honors God's purposes; again, *that they may all be one*.

V.

CROP WALK is an event where we actually get out there and do something. We walk ... whatever distance our bodies allow us. Whatever your *life-situation*, we have a *walking track* for you.

Our walking is a symbolic act; it's a message—both to ourselves and to our community—that we care. It's an activity where—together—we **build up the common good**. We do our part to help raise money for world hunger. CROP WALK helps us lift up one of the wider emphases in the *United Church of Christ*: **think globally, act locally**.

So, we're inviting us all to sign up today for CROP WALK 2011 ... in Fellowship Hall after church. Again, the date is **February 20th**, four weeks from today. Our goal is 60 walkers from our church, including children ... and 200 walkers over all. This will be our 11th Annual CROP Walk, since I've been here.

We'll be joined in the WALK by some of the other churches in Miami Lakes ... and others, we well. After the three-mile walk, we'll have our community picnic to follow on our church grounds, like we've done in recent years. It's a celebrative day ... a day when we come together to **build up the common good** in our community and in our world.

Again, 25% of the funds raised come back into our community, going to the Family Center at St. Andrews Lutheran Church in nearby Hialeah.

VI.

In closing, friends, anything we can do to alleviate suffering and hunger in the world is something we simply must do as Christians. In a recent Christian Century article, entitled, *The Scourge of World Hunger*, I can't forget the poignant words of **Volli Carucci**, of the United Nations World Food Program, when he said,

Looking into the eyes of someone dying of hunger becomes a disease of the soul.

Wow! *A disease of the soul*. That's a lot to live with. With that image in mind, we **MUST** do our part in combating hunger around the world. Again, *think globally, act locally!*

Hear these yearning words of faith from the heart of **Africa** ...

I saw a child today, Lord, who will NOT die tonight, hurried into hunger's grave. She is bright and full of life because her parents have a job and feed her. But somewhere, everywhere, 10,000 life-lamps will go out and not be lit again tomorrow.

O God, teach us the way.

And from a Canadian liturgy ...

You have come from afar, and have waited long and are wearied:

Come, let us sit side by side ...

Sharing the same bread,

Drawn by the same source,

To quiet the same hunger that makes us weak ...

Then, standing together, let us share the same spirit,

The same thoughts that once again draw us together

In friendship and unity and peace. Amen!

Let your peace come, O God, through the ways you have revealed to us in Jesus.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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