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Living For the Common Good

Galatians 6:10

Several months ago Thomas Friedman wrote an article which concluded that the greatest threat to our world today is a crisis of ethical behavior. He was writing from Athens, Greece:

By the time I got there last Sunday, the fire at the Martin Egnatia Bank on Stadiou Street here had been extinguished, but the charcoal smell of the torched bank interior still wafted out onto the sidewalk through the broken windows. Ever since Greek anarchists firebombed the bank on May 5, killing three employees who had defied a general strike, the Martin bank has become an impromptu shrine. A huge pile of bouquets, teddy bears and scribbled condolence notes grew by the hour on the sidewalk out front, as Athenians kept on coming to pay their respects to the innocents killed inside. People would lay down a rose and then just stare at the building or read the handwritten messages pasted all over the façade. My own eye went to a colorful drawing, clearly done by a child, of a burning building and people screaming, 'help, help' from the upper windows. Under it was written, in Greek: 'In what kind of a world will I grow up? Lydia, age 10.'

Friedman then described the series of events triggered by this incident. Fears that Greece would default on its massive debt held by European banks caused a steep decline in the Euro. These developments exacerbated by other events led to a sudden 1,000 point drop in the Dow on Wall Street. We are living in a world that is increasingly integrated. We are interconnected in such a way that ethical lapses in one place can reverberate, creating damage across the world. It is becoming increasingly clear that our way of life cannot be sustained unless greed is tempered and restrained by a strong sense of responsibility toward others.

This is the truth Paul was trying to convey to the Galatian church. In the sixth chapter of his letter to the Galatians Paul makes clear that public responsibility is at the heart of their mission. He challenges them to be generous in responding to the needs of people who are hurting. Paul argues that it doesn't matter who the people are who do not have enough. The compassion of the church is to be directed to believers and unbelievers alike. Their mission is to serve the common good. Paul says, "So then, whenever we have the opportunity let us work for the good of all... (Galatians 6:10)."

Paul wants the Galatians to understand that living for the common good has long term consequences. When the common good is served they are creating a better world for themselves and their children. Paul calls this activity sowing to the Spirit and points out that it leads to eternal life. But to live for self indulgence is sowing to the flesh and that leads to corruption and death.

The nature of this choice has been described by Simone Weil in her contrast of gravity of grace. She points out that we all begin by living in the realm of gravity. Gravity in this sense is not just the idea that what goes up must come down. To live by gravity means to follow our instincts to gratify, protect, and enhance ourselves while giving no thought to the welfare of others. It means to let our greed take us as far as it can without getting caught. It means thinking about short term profits rather

than long term ethical consequences. But when we make the choice to voluntarily restrain ourselves for the sake of the common good, we live in the realm of grace. In the realm of grace we are sowing life, but in the realm of gravity we are sowing death. As Paul tells the Galatians we will indeed reap what we sow.

This clear cut distinction between sowing death and sowing life was understood by our abolitionist forebears. In 1854 the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society organized a Fourth of July gathering with a special twist. A poster advertised the event in these words:

No Slavery Fourth of July!

The managers of the Mass. Anti-Slavery Society invite without distinction of party or sect, all who are ready and mean to be known as on Liberty's side, in the great struggle which is now upon us, to meet in convention at the Grove in Framingham, on the approaching Fourth of July, there to pass the day in no idle glorying in our country's liberties, but in deep humiliation for her Disgrace and Shame, and in resolute purpose—God being our leader—to rescue Old Massachusetts at least from being bound forever to the car of slavery (Massachusetts Historical Society in Henry Mayer, *All On Fire*, page 456).

Thousands of people went by special trains to this outdoor gathering where there was indeed no idle glorying. William Lloyd Garrison addressed the gathering about the recent forced return to slavery of a fugitive apprehended in the North. To protest that tragic event Garrison burned a copy of the U. S. Constitution. In those days the Constitution protected the rights of slave owners and relegated people born into slavery to be treated as property. Our forebears were radical in their commitment to sowing life rather than death. They believed in living for the common good.

In the 10th chapter of Luke Jesus helps the disciples understand what it means to live for the common good. Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him to travel as his emissaries. They are to go into the towns and villages to announce the good news of God's grace. Jesus gives them very specific instructions about traveling light and depending on the hospitality of others. They are anxious about this journey and their slim chance of success.

But when they return they are flush with excitement over what they have accomplished. Even the demons were submissive to them. But Jesus cautions them against celebrating the tangible evidence of their success. Personal success and power is not what their mission was about. The journey was not about them. It was about sharing the good news with those who are in desperate need. It is about serving the common good.

There are many ways in which Westminster seeks to serve the common good. One is the project of the Peacemaking/Social Justice committee to adopt a street near the church. Westminster volunteers periodically go out to gather refuse that accumulates along the street. The city provides bright yellow vests with "Adopt A Street" painted in large letters for the volunteers to wear so that passing motorists can easily see them. One of our members was wearing such a vest as she was approached by a mother and her little girl who were out walking their dog. When the girl walked up to the Westminster worker her mother grabbed her by the arm and said, "Don't talk to her, she's a prisoner!" Hoping to reassure the girl, our member responded by saying, "No I'm not a prisoner." She was there not because she had to be there but because she wanted to be.

To the mother's surprise they had just encountered someone who was living for the common good. In that moment she was forced to reconsider her assumptions about the kind of world in which her daughter is growing up.