

Genesis 2:5-15, 3:1-7  
Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19  
Matthew 4:1-11

There is no doubt that we are a people of distressed lives, as Jan Schnell Rippentrop, a Lutheran pastor calls it. The socio-political climate in the United States is in distress and causes distress. Tearing families apart when immigrants are deported. The killings of African Americans. The vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and bomb threats at Jewish schools and community centers. The shooting of two immigrants from India in Olathe, Kansas by a man who had been spewing ethnic slurs at them and telling them they did not belong in the United States. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The Middle Class is disappearing. People are concerned about what is going to happen to their health care. The political gridlock in Washington, D.C. and in so many state capitols prevents good legislation because our politicians now are more concerned about winning whatever issue they support rather than both sides of the aisles working together for the common good. Rather than working on win-win solutions, legislation has become a win/lose game. The socio-political climate in the United States is in distress and causes distress. The church, the community of faith, you and I cannot neglect or ignore the distress. God calls us to act.

What more appropriate time to think about our role as the people of God than at Lent. Lent is a time of prayer, spiritual discipline, and self-examination. A key theme in Lent is repentance. It is a season of self-examination as we seek to live righteous lives. As I mentioned last Wednesday night at the Ash Wednesday worship service, righteousness refers to having a right relationship with God and a right relationship with others. Having a right relationship with others is integral to having a right relationship with God. You cannot have a right relationship with God if you do not have a right

relationship with others. Repentance means a turning away, turning away from sin and a turning to God. It implies a change. As a community of faith, we need to practice self-examination as to our role in this context of distress. Are we contributing to the distress, or are we seeking to do our part in making a change? To do nothing is to contribute to the distress. The church needs to speak life into contexts of death.

During the season of Lent this year, we are going to look at our relationship to others. If our relationship to others is integral to our relationship with God, then we need to do a self-examination of our relationship with others. We are going to take a look at repenting from individualism and seeking the common good; changing a climate of distress into a climate of hope; repenting from hoarding and trusting God instead; instead of making disparaging remarks about others who are different, respecting all people as children of God; and by listening to those who have long been silenced. This morning I want us to think about the common good. As Christians, we are called to seek the common good.

We live in a society of individualism. We no longer go to movie houses to watch a movie with the community, but stay home and with DVDs, Netflix, and Amazon Prime, watch movies in the privacy of our homes. We no longer have front porches where we gather together with our neighbors in the evenings. Instead to retreat to the privacy of our homes. Fewer people are bowling in leagues, and yet more people are bowling today. We are “bowling alone.” *Bowling Alone* is the title of a book written by Robert Putnam, in which he documents the collapse of the American Community.

This individualism has led to an individualistic faith. We have spiritualized and privatized faith to the point that it is limited to a private relationship with God. The gospel

is limited to “being saved,” and has nothing to do with any others in the community. The church’s only concern is to see to it that people are saved, that they will make it to heaven, and nothing more. This is a distortion of the gospel. It leads to an indifference toward others. To detach faith from a concern for the needs of others is a distortion of the gospel. The gospel has a concern for the common good.

Our gospel lesson this morning is Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Jesus fasted for forty days. The devil tempted him to prove that he was the Son of God by commanding stones to become loaves of bread, to test God’s commitment to him by throwing himself off a pinnacle, and to gain dominion over the world by worshiping the devil. The temptations were to provide preferentially for one’s own needs, to test God, and to accumulate power. Jesus remained communally oriented, as Dr. Rippentrop points out. “Jesus privileged his relationship with God and responsibility to others over the opportunistic lure of the temptations.” Jesus recognized that he had a responsibility to others. Jesus was not indifferent to the needs of others.

As Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, points out, “Money and possessions are to be shared in a neighborly way. A core theme of biblical faith is that economic practice and policy must be ordered to serve the common good.” Deuteronomy insists that money and possessions are to be for the good of the entire community. There is nothing wrong with having wealth, but it is to be used for the common good. A market economy like ours, assumes that there are no neighbors. The pursuit of wealth is set against the well-being of the community. There are only rivals, competitors, and threats. Rather than a concern for the community, it is a fight against

the competitor. Rather than the accumulation and concentration of wealth, we, as Christians, are to be concerned about the well-being of all neighbors, of all peoples.

The very early church sought the common good. They practiced communal property that provided support for all in the community of Jesus followers in Jerusalem. They “had all things in common.” They would sell their possessions and distribute them to any who had need. This did not mean they lived in a commune. In that day, there was not the one percent. They did not practice possessive individualism. However, there was social stratification and distinct social classes and a legitimate inequality of social access, social, power, and social goods. Thus, the common good in that day was counter cultural, even as it is counter cultural today.

For some Lent is a season of fasting, of doing without. But Lent is also a season of doing good. Last Wednesday night, Ash Wednesday, we read from Isaiah and this is what the prophet declared:

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Last year Pope Francis, during Lent, suggested another kind of fast. He suggested that “we fast from indifference toward others.” If we fast from indifference toward others, we can help to bring about wholeness and make an end of distress.

Hosanna in the highest!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.