

While each of us knows someone who is doing well right now, we are also well aware of someone whose financial state hangs by a thread or is living beyond their means. We might be one of those persons, who, because of what we are called to do, is working and making a living. Similarly, we might be one of the ones who feel like we are scraping by, and for who knows how much longer.

What does it mean for us to hear the words, “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” In this one question, how many various worldviews are presented and challenged in an instant?

Is, “Don’t worry—be happy” what we need to hear? When we read this passage at our Bible study last Tuesday, there were a variety of responses to how it felt to hear these words from *Matthew*, given what is going in the world and close to home.

How you hear this passage depends on your context. Perhaps your life mirrors the one reflected in the commercial that plays at Christmas, where you are the surprised spouse whose other half opens the curtains on Christmas morning, and there is a shiny new Lexus in the driveway with a red bow around it. Or, instead, you might be one of the many for whom the recession has removed your employment and left you wondering what is next. In what context do the words that Jesus speaks to a multitude that is vastly poor and expendable, hit you? “Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’

Who is hearing these words? To whom or to which group of people can you say, “Don’t worry about tomorrow,” and expect a civil response?

Jesus is speaking to people for whom there was no social safety net in a century that valued only the good of the empire, over any obligation to seek the common good for all. At yesterday’s Jesus Seminar here at IUCC, scholars Bernard Brandon Scott and Joanna Dewey laid out what it was like to be one of the majority, people who existed at or near the bottom. Such people might never own a new piece of clothing, or have anything more than a small, dark room in which an entire family lived. Once you lost one piece of your ability or status, it was a fast slide down from which it was almost impossible to regain yourself. Once expendable, you might live two or three years on the streets, much like our homeless do today. A lifespan for such people was remarkably short, and once you were gone, others would take your place. How could such a brutal and uncaring system of governance, based on satisfying individuals at the top, while feeling no obligation to serve the good of all, exist?

Former Congressperson Barbara Jordan once said, “A nation is formed by the willingness of each of us to share in the responsibility for upholding the common good.” Are we still a people committed to the ideal of the pursuit of the common good for all? Our opening hymn and our scripture ask us to “Seek ye first the kingdom of God,” meaning

In my neighborhood on the upper west side of Manhattan, a wave of homeless people hit the streets in 1981. These were the residents of mental institutions, turned onto the streets by the decision of a new administration to shut these places down. It was a heart-wrenching scene, as neighbors tried their best to help until it became evident that it posed a danger to oneself to do so.

I can never forget the woman neighbors called, “the little girl.” She was probably in her late forties. Her hair was gray, and tied in two simple braids. She clutched a dirty, worn doll, and she walked through our neighborhood looking frightened. She called, “Mommy?” as she

moved with trepidation down West 86th St. She didn't last long—perhaps only a week or so, I really can't remember—except that she helped change my social consciousness forever.

Can you imagine that Jesus would be saying to such a one as this, “Can you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” The scripture may be confusing, depending on who is hearing it, but it ends with, “strive first for the kingdom of God,” ...seek the common good of all—a society will ultimately rise or fall based on how it treats its people, as we are witnessing in the Middle East today.

Can you fathom a Jesus that would say to one of these, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

Today, my heart is in Wisconsin, as it will be in all parts of our country, as those who attack the common good persevere. I find a consonance between the demonizing slangology, “welfare queens” and the latest incarnation known as, “bottom of the barrel teachers whose tenure rewards their laziness.”

I am who I am because of good teachers. Teachers are my heroes—the ones who taught me how to think, and to this day, all across this country, despite low and lowering salaries, pensions and expectations, they still rise every morning to teach your children and grandchildren the basic grounding of history and math, the wonders of science and literature, the mind-expanding world of art and music, and more than anything, the ability to think for themselves in ways they could not comprehend without the benefit of an education.

Did anyone in this room have a teacher that changed your life? Who was it? Would you wish that person to give up the means to support his or herself with dignity, given the benefit you derived from having the advantage of learning from such a teacher?

May God bless our teachers, and all public service employees, all across this country and the world. Every day, they do more tangible good than any hedge-fund operator or banker, or for that matter, any member of any profession that I could name.

When such dedicated and underpaid people agree to every demand that they are presented with, to the detriment of their livelihood and how they will be able to raise their own families; and are told in addition that they will also have to give up the right to collective bargaining forever, I call these people abused.

Would you say to the teachers in Wisconsin, and soon, to teachers all across America, “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’” Yet, Jesus finishes this passage by enrolling his listeners in the building of the Realm of God—the place of equal welcome and access.

Soon to be canonized as a saint, no one less than former Pope Paul VI said, “The important role of union organizations must be admitted: their object is the representation of the various categories of workers, their lawful collaboration in the economic advance of society, and the development of the sense of their responsibility for the realization of the common good.”

That phrase again...”the common good.” The “common good” is a notion that originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, the contemporary ethicist, John Rawls, defined the common good as “certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage.”

The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a manner that benefits all people. Examples of particular common goods or parts of the common good include an accessible and affordable public health care system, and effective system of public safety and security, peace among the

nations of the world, a just legal and political system, and unpolluted natural environment, and a flourishing economic system. Because such systems, institutions, and environments have such a powerful impact on the well-being of members of a society, it is no surprise that virtually every social problem in one way or another is linked to how well these systems and institutions are functioning.

As these examples suggest, the common good does not just happen. Establishing and maintaining the common good require the cooperative efforts of many people.¹

Speaking across the centuries, theologian John Calvin tells us that “All men were created to busy themselves with labor for the common good.”

Also from across the waters and time itself, our own theological and ecclesiastical forebears, the pilgrims aboard the Mayflower off the shores of Cape Cod, established the “Mayflower Compact,” which spoke to the preservation of this common good, and became a major influence for the framers of the Constitution, that they might also establish the importance of providing for the common good of the people.

The pursuit of the “common good” is as integral to the American life as the right of workers everywhere to bargain collectively with their employers is to apple pie.

Of whom, then, shall we ask for a greater share of responsibility in the greater good—those to whom it would be a travesty to repeat Jesus’ words, “Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink,” or rather, to those whose great privilege makes it incumbent upon them to participate in the common good by contributing as they have been blessed to give?

Jesus tells us this—though sometimes in his silence and with surprise endings. He is the master storyteller; he doesn’t tell us which person to root for—the prodigal son, his brother or his father. He didn’t apologize for the manager who paid the latecomers as much as the early-risers. He didn’t mess up the silence in his stories by supplying them with morals. He left it up to you to discover the truth therein.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that, “Jesus’ preaching was full of questions, which left great pockets of silence in his proclamation. ‘Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?’ Over and over, he reached out to those who looked to him for answers and turned them around to look at the world instead—at sibling rivalries and unjust labor practices, at miffed royalty and mugged travelers—not to dodge his listeners’ search for meaning but *to enroll them in the making of it*. His silence gave them room to speak, and better yet, to act. His restraint guaranteed their freedom, which they might or might not use to seek God. The choice was theirs, as it remains ours.”² How have we been enrolled in the finding and enactment of the common good and the reign of God therein?

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is ‘community’ – the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of humanity to assume a semblance of responsibility for our brother and sister.”

May God bless our brothers and sisters wherever they are attacked and demonized, and may the common good prevail, so as to bring about the reign of God and the blessings of life for all, and not for some. AMEN.

Sermon Resources

1. For this and the preceding paragraph, I am indebted to: Manuel Velasquez, Claire Andre, Thomas Shanks, S.J., and Michael J. Meyer
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent*, Cloister Books, Cambridge. 1998 pp 76-77

Matthew 6:24-34

24 “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. 25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.