



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Reclaiming the Common

Clay Nelson © 12 November 2017

This week has been an uncommon one for me. I spent the first three days as a guest speaker at the Sea of Faith Conference in Upper Hutt. I was joined by six members or friends of this congregation. The focus was on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The structure was for each of the four keynote addresses to be followed by small group discussions of the questions raised by the talk. One of those speakers was former MP Dr Sue Bradford, a life-long activist for changing the system to be fairer and kinder. In her talk on Reformation versus Transformation, she raised the question, what would a transformed Aotearoa look like? In my group, Marion Hines, partner of David, took the words right out of my mouth. For her and me, a transformed Aotearoa would always act for the common good.

The word common can be combined with others – as in a common place, common sense or even common man – to give us the understanding that we are talking about something that is ordinary, regular, familiar and widespread.

However, the idiom “in common” is not ordinary. It means belonging equally to everyone. When used in regards to the community as a whole, it indicates that which is held for the common good.

The concept of the common good is prominent early in Christian writings. In the Epistle of Barnabas, it is written: “Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek together the common good.” The goal is everyone equally benefiting. The way to reach the goal is to come together.

The common good is an essential concept in Augustine of Hippo’s “City of God.” Augustine in turn was influenced by the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle’s philosophy also influenced Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas concerning the common good. The concept of The Common Good became standard in Roman Catholic moral theology.

Former Unitarian Universalist president Peter Morales speaks of the common good in his sermon, “We Are One.” In the sermon, he says, “We are people who have always affirmed human diversity. We have always looked to the future and seen new possibilities. We must do so again. Let us be the people who break down the arbitrary barriers that divide us from them. We are one, and love and hope will guide us. Let us, together with all our brothers and sisters, build a new way.”

I first heard of the concept of “The Common,” in New England. The common is a place or a space reserved in each town or city for the building of the local church, which would also become the focal centre of community activities, be they religious, social or political.

In England, “the commons” referred to land which was held in common as opposed to privatised land which was enclosed and owned by individuals as private property. In

medieval England, the “common” referred to land that was legally part of a private estate, but over which tenants held certain rights.

Eventually, the concept of the common came to refer to essential resources a community had rights to and access to. For the Maori, who had no concept of private ownership before the Pakeha arrived, every resource was held in common.

Not so long ago many things were held in common by people. Public education was created for the common good, as were roads and city water systems, and public works in general were created for the common good. Commons have two characteristics: first they are gifts and secondly, they are gifts that are shared.

We enjoy these gifts as members of a community rather than as individuals. Some gifts we hold in common are basic parts of the ecosystem like the air we breathe and the water we drink and use in so many other ways. But there are also gifts we share like languages and music, local and national parks and even the internet.

Sadly, the idea of the common good has paled in the neoliberal age. Neoliberalism is an economic view that suits our globalised commercial world, but humanity and the environment less so. While it is neither new or liberal, its influence has been particularly felt for the past 40 years. Its proponents were reacting to totalitarian forms of communism in the early to mid-twentieth century. They considered anything that governments and trade unions did to promote the common good as a form of fascism. It was their view that the “liberal” response was to unfetter capitalism from government regulation and collective bargaining. Since Reagan, Thatcher and, here in New Zealand, Roger Douglas, Neoliberalism has had its way with us thanks to both centre left and centre right political parties. Deregulation of the marketplace and disempowering of unions have gutted belief in the importance of the common good.

To carry out their political and economic agenda, neoliberals had to convince us that we were alone and in competition with everyone else for whatever crumbs were thrown our way. We each had to look out for our own interests and view others as a threat to those interests. Selfishness became good and practical. Seeking the common good was naïve at best.

For more than two generations neoliberalism has sought to divide us and the price has been high. For example, our divisions have allowed us to think it is okay for some to live in poverty as if it was their fault. We did not consider the cost to the common good of their children living in substandard housing, on substandard diets, with substandard health care and going to substandard schools.

Our divisions blinded us to the perils of selling off our assets held in common to global multinationals who had no stake in our communities or nation. We took no notice of those same interests mining and drilling our natural resources for the benefit of those with sufficient capital to invest in faraway places. It was no matter to them if our water and air was befouled. They did not have to drink or breathe them. Neoliberalism reduced everything to a commodity and we did not notice when we ourselves and our labour were reduced to the same. Our consumer-based economy eventually consumed us in our desire for the cheapest goods and services provided by the cheapest labour.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of neoliberalism is that it has perverted our understanding of what is in our best interest convincing us it is not the common good. It has set us up against each other. Issues important to all of us are too often framed as someone must win and someone must lose. We saw this phenomenon in abundance in the recent election. It didn't matter if the issue was water policy, immigration, refugees, housing, child poverty, welfare reform, charter schools, climate change, prison reform, a living wage, transportation, regional development, or taxes on capital gains. For instance, Labour ran on an anti-immigration agenda and National pushed tax cuts over welfare reform. Neither position promotes the common good. Instead of seeing these issues as reasons to come together to find common sense answers that enhance the common good they were used to divide us. When we as a people are divided, it is usually to the benefit of those who wish to own, control, exploit, eliminate the common.

For some this may sound like a sermon focused on politics rather than spiritual matters, yet seeking the common good is very much in the purview of a faith community. Historically, as I said earlier, the town common was where the local church was. The meetinghouse was where the business of the community was carried out. The moral theology of the meetinghouse permeated and shaped the culture of the town.

Even before Christian worship, the Greeks had a concept of liturgy. It is a word made up of two words: *litos* and *ergos*. *Litos* means people or public. *Ergos* means work. Together they meant the work of the people. Liturgy meant working for the common good. An example might be if the town needed a bridge over the river dividing it, those of means would provide material and the whole town would provide the sweat equity to build it.

The common good and the agreement about how we are to use things that are held in common is the bridge we seek to build in regards to social justice within our local communities and the larger world. An influential Unitarian theologian, the late James Luther Adams wrote that, "A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief. It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs us of our birth right of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members; it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church or party – to a self-made God."

Adams went on to posit that the "...tenet of the free person's faith is that the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality finds its richest focus in free, cooperative efforts for the common good." To me, this says that our lives as free people are fulfilled only when we are in right relations with each other working for the common good of humanity.

If our religious orientation, our ethical values are not joined with justice toward others, we will surely be brought to grief because we will not be at one with the universe. What do we members the Auckland Unitarian Church hold in common? This building, the use of the land upon which it is built, and all that we have built up together over the last 115 years. Prominent among these are the common values spelled out in our Unitarian Principles and our Covenant. And, we hold in common the gift of the communities in which we live. And living in this city and this country and the gifts we hold in common extend much further. Ultimately, we recognize that we are part of the interconnected web of existence which has no borders. Reclaiming the common is our spiritual task and purpose.

