



RECLAIMING THE COMMONS: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT.

Introduction

In changing the conversation about the meaning of Christian life and witness in the contemporary West a number of biblical texts point to ways the Spirit is calling Christians to re-imagine their role and vocation. One, which has been part of this conversation for some time, is Jeremiah 29

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...pray to the Lord on its behalf. Build houses

and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you...Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (Jer 29:7)

God's instructions are to seek the *common good* of the city. What do we mean by this phrase 'the common good'? Minimally, it has to do with the ways we see and seek the welfare of our communities and neighborhoods. The language of this passage is about things like *building* and *planting*, *marrying* and *having children* - it is language of hope found in the midst of unexpected places like the neighborhoods of Babylon. The community of God's people is invited into the work of seeking the well being of the city's neighborhoods. There is to be no withdrawing into sectarian or religious minority groups - following this God involves seeking the common good. What does it mean to seek the common good and why is it so important? This essay seeks to address these questions in our contemporary Western contexts as God's people. For some of us formed in late twentieth century church traditions this notion of the common good sounds strange. We are more familiar with older distinctions between for example, evangelism and social action, that reside inside a view that the church is the center of all we do and why we engage in social action. In other words, evangelism is the goal of social action.

The language of *common good* established in Jeremiah 29 seems different from many contemporary understandings of being the church. In this sense, it is a way of life that stretches us to move outside and beyond our current practices and habits about being the church. Such stretching is always difficult, anxiety producing and risky because we find ourselves invited into unfamiliar places where we may not feel safe or comfortable. A second biblical text, therefore, suggests something else that the Spirit is doing amongst the churches today. This is the story in *Genesis 18* where the God invites the aged, settled Abram and Sarah on a huge journey beyond anything they had known. Part of the story is in Genesis 18: 1-15, 21:1-7 and in Genesis 12:1-3. The first suggests the absurdity and incongruity of God's call to these people. Abram and Sara were old, dried up and by all the standard accounts of their day, no longer of any value. They were set in their ways and expectations, as seen in Sarah's honest, realistic response to the announcement. God comes to turn their worlds upside down and reframe their imagination about what it would mean to follow this strange God. The later text in Genesis 12 ('Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to a land I will show you') describes how these two would engage the call of God. They are called out on a journey wherein they do not know the route or the destination. In a rootless, individualized culture like ours the power of what is happening here is easily lost. We have been shaped by generations of individualisms in which it is expected that people simply uproot themselves and go wherever. We are shaped by a world that has little sense of what *place* means. Place is where the god's and the ancestors that give identity abide. To leave place is to leave identity; it is the equivalent of ceasing to exist. This call to journey was a radical upheaval of life and existence. It is a text for our own time suggesting the way the Spirit is calling the churches today to journey from this entrenched sense that they are the center and locale of all God's activity and journey into the *commons* to seek the welfare of the places where we dwell. How to do this requires us to dig deeper into this

language of the *commons*. While the word is not found in the Biblical narratives it has deeply Biblical connections.

Sources of the *Commons*

When a culture tests new language or seeks to re-introduce language that has fallen out of use, these are signs we're living in a period of huge change seeking for images, stories and language to assist us to understand what is happening and find ways forward. We live in such a time. The images of Jeremiah 29 and the Abram/Sarah stories in *Genesis* are examples of this search. The more we feel like we're riding a roller coaster through a darkened tunnel the more we will try out language that might make sense of our experience. In our own time it is clear that long established institutions, beliefs, assumptions and practices that collectively provided us with a way of making sense of the world are coming apart. This has happened before and will happen again. Galileo's revolution displaced the earth from the center of the solar system and disturbed a worldview which had reigned for more than a millennium. It had provided people with what had appeared to be a sensible, rational way of interpreting the world. But it came apart. Something similar happened to the brilliance and wonder of the Newtonian universe. A similar undoing seems to be taking place around our established views of the social world. Such solid institutions as marriage, childhood, family, neighborhood, church, and economics are coming apart. There is little in our current lives that aren't undergoing such transformation. Overarching narratives that appeared to us as 'common sense' are unraveling. This is why we look for language, words, and images to assist us in making sense of what is happening. The language of the *commons* is one such way of doing this. It is a word that is rooted in our Western history and, as such, we will understand why it is being used again if we grasp something of what it meant in our earlier history.

The Feudal Commons

Inside the language of *commons* is the language of *place* and *space* that invites us into a world we have lost. For us the ideas of place and space are embedded in such words as *real estate*. The land or house we may own is our private real estate that has a market value. It is a commodity we own and can sell as we wish. Furthermore, we no longer live in a world that imagines itself primarily in terms of the local. We tend to think in more abstract, universal terms, with such concepts as the state (political parties in representative democracies), or education run by a host of professionals or a global economic sphere where the 'markets' or 'corporations' shape what is happening. But until the late 18th and early 19th centuries the West was largely governed by locally based, self-governing management among the people of an area. This is not to say these systems were democratic in any sense of our context. The overall system was known as *feudalism* in contradistinction to our global capitalist and nation state systems. Much of it was difficult for the majority - an elite preserved power and privilege. Discussion of this notion of the *commons* is not to romanticize another way of life but to set the context for the discussion of why we are seeking to recover this usage in some form. One of the important

frames that shaped the *commons* in the feudal world was theological and had to do with notions of ownership and accountability. As stated above, in our world land is a commodity owned by an individual to do with as he or she determines within the law. But the feudal context functioned inside a radically different narrative. The land in any local area was a part of God's creation – it was God's land given to us to be stewarded and cared for in the context of responsibility to the other. There was, therefore, in this sense, no private ownership and the idea that land was a commodity that could be bought and sold for profit was beyond the imagination of people. This is very much like the ways First Nations Peoples in North America understand their relationship to the land. Land is a gift and a responsibility, a treasure kept in trust for all and by all. In the feudal world this understanding was overlaid with another perspective that no longer exists. It is what is called the *Great Chain of Being*. Shaped largely by a Thomistic and Aristotelian understanding, it understood all of creation as being ordered. Inside this order every creature and human being had its or his/her place. This system was usually fixed, so someone born a laborer stayed a laborer and someone born a lord stayed a lord. This is why there are these gradations to place and role in the feudal world so that the lord did have great swaths of land and the feudal peasant did work under the tutelage of a lord. These lords often put huge tax burdens upon the serfs but at bottom there remained this sense that the land belonged to God and was not 'owned' in our sense of the word. Much of the land was, therefore, held in common – it was the place where the serf could work with other serfs free from the fear that it would be sold out from under them and they would be left destitute. In this context the commons were held *in common* to serve the common good of the people. Together the production and consumption of goods in the commons were primarily for the common good of the people in a local area rather than the private use of individuals for the purposes of profit. What the commons did was give people, in the context of powerful overlords who often pauperized them, the capacity to develop a shared economy that was locally based, self-managed and shaped by a sense of obligation and fidelity to one another. Peasant councils ran local, community structured economies.

A New Form - a 'modern' Economy Emerges

This concept of common land emerged in Anglo Saxon England. It existed until the Enclosure Acts that started in the late 18th century in England at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The great enclosures and the market economy that emerged transformed our understanding of land, place, our relationships to money, from shared stewardship to the rights of exclusive ownership of real estate by individuals. After centuries of social, economic and political life in which people belonged to the land, the land came to belong to an individual with all the rights to do as he or she pleased with that real estate. Place and land became saleable. At the same time, the sense of place and mutual belonging was broken apart as labor (our work) was also monetized as a saleable commodity. We had left a world of social obligation and entered one of contractual obligation within a market economy that was largely comprised of anonymous relationships determined by the exchange of goods and a legal contract. A primary role of the law and the state was now to protect the private individual and their property. This represented

a fundamental shift in the meaning of social life in the West. It represented one of the most radical and significant transformations of human life in the history of the world.[1] From that point forward both the creation (land and all that it produces) and being human are evaluated on the basis of money and exchange. Again, this is neither to romanticize feudal Europe nor diminish the positive results of Western economies in transforming the lives of its citizens. Rather, it is to propose that these radical shifts also came at a huge cost to the created world, to each human being and to the sense of social belonging and identity. A search for new language in the midst of the early 21st century West is a search for ways to discover again forms of social, economic, political and spiritual life that address the growing sense that our current ways of shaping society are massively unsustainable and deeply destructive of communal life. It is in this context that the language of the *commons* is being re-introduced. It is about how we reweave the fabric of social, religious, political and economic life at the level of the local and everyday. The Spirit is calling God's people into an engagement with this question and the idea of the *commons* offers a generative way of entering that conversation.

This great transformation that reshaped the West has now generated a sense of crisis in our culture.[2] What displaced the local and everyday as primary places for social, spiritual and political innovation was the state and the market. The narrative of neoliberalism created a state politics that prioritizes privatization, consumerism, and individualism. These twin elements of a new West became so dominant, so pervasive in our lives that we reached the place where our only imagination for discovering solutions to crisis was either the state or the market. Yet, at this point there is a growing and pervasive sense that neither of these primary structures of the modern West have the capacity to address the crises we face or engender a new kind of societal thriving. Without naivety or romanticism there is an increasing sense that the way forward may well be discerned by a return to the local and a conviction that ordinary people in local communities are the generative engines in cultivating a new social imagination. It is in this context that the language of the commons has been re-introduced.

The Common Good and Biblical Imagination

An understanding that all of creation is God's shapes Scripture. There is a deep, fundamental covenant that human beings hold the creation as a gift for all and ensure that every human being is cared for with dignity and honor. This is about the common good. As stated in the Jeremiah passage, it is part of the vocation of God's people to seek the welfare of the city in which we abide. Connected to this basic framing of Christian vocation is the critical question of how it can be practiced. At one level the challenges confronting Western societies are immense, seemingly intractable and so complex that only experts could possibly know the solutions and actions that need to be taken. Who can fathom the challenges of climate change? Who can understand the intricacies of the global market or the complexity of nation state relationships in such a fractured world? In the contemporary West the power of the state and the market suggest that ordinary people in their everyday lives are not capable of engaging such massive challenges. But there is a growing series of voices that are saying the opposite, namely, that it is

in the myriad of local places where ordinary people dwell, work and have children that the hopeful responses to these massive challenges will emerge. These voices are echoing what has always been at the core of Biblical imagination. In strange ways that are counterintuitive to our modern, Western imagination God is always local. God, through the people of Israel and, most clearly in Jesus, is local. The prologue to the *Gospel of John* goes out of its way to make this point. Incarnation is a technical word for the fact that God can only be known in the local and everyday. What this means is that God's future, the ways for the healing of the world, are gestating in the local and everyday. This instinct to return to the *commons* is not antithetical to Christian imagination but is at its core. What might social, political and economic life look like if Christians began with the conviction that in God's kingdom it is in the local, in the *commons* that the new creation begins to be birthed and discerned? In Catholic social teaching there is a word that expresses what is essential and creative about locating our energies in the local. It is *subsidiarity*. This principle argues that it is a wrong to assign to a greater or higher association what lesser or smaller associations can do for themselves. What we have done since the great transformation is given over responsibility of our social, political and economic lives to the powers of the state and the market, losing our sense of the commons where the resources for human thriving can actually be found.

There are massive challenges to embracing this kingdom imagination. Not the least being a deeply embedded bias in the direction of the state and market as the answers to our crisis. Within this is the conviction that only experts and professionals can solve our complex problems. A second challenge is the overarching dominance of a liberal view of the supremacy of the individual; the self has the right to do whatever he/she chooses. This sense of the individual has eviscerated the commons and the idea of being accountable and responsible for one another. This individualism has taken over our congregations where people choose to go away from their neighborhoods to join worshiping groups that suit their tastes and match their demographics. It is present in the ways we move wherever we might want to find work that maximizes our personal goals. Thirdly, there is the most basic challenge (the Abrahamic challenge) of how a people after so many years embedded in these ways of life, stir their tired bones to go on a journey that seems counter intuitive to everything they were taught? How do we practically take this journey of changing the conversation by following the way of Jesus going without our baggage back into a neighborhood to rebuild the *commons*? How do we learn again to be vulnerable and available to the neighbor; to listen them into free speech, to see and call forth the mystery of who they are in God's economy and, therefore, rebuild the commons?

Conclusion

None of this is simple. But if there is a growing conversation about how we form the new *commons* then it is probably the case that already the Spirit is seeding, calling forth and growing little experiments in this way of life already. God is always going ahead of us and inviting us to follow. There are always these small shoots of life already happening. We are often surprised that what seems to us a new and unique idea is actually, somehow, something that is

'in the water' among others:

While we rightly talk about isolation, atomization and hyper-individualism as challenges to the common good, this captures only one dimension of a more complex social history. Arguably, what we face is not a simple decline of socialization but the simultaneous eclipse and rebirth of new forms of socialization.^[3]

This is not our work to make but our calling to listen, discern, see what the Spirit is doing and join in. God's dream of renewing and restoring the world has everything, literally everything, to do with the shared life. When we connect the dots between sharing life with God, one another, and the created world, this is reality as God intends it. You could say that God's dream is the shared life and the place where that dream is turned into reality is the local.

[1] See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957) and Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Margin Cost Society* (NY: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014)

[2] See Zygmunt Bauman and Carlo Bordoni, *State of Crisis* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014) and Manuel Castells, Joao Caraca, and Gustavo Cardoso, *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[3] Anna Rowlands "The Language of the Common Good" in Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail (editors), *Together for the Common Good* (London: SCM, 2015), page 8.

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Journal of Missional Practice

