

A Fading of The Greater Good

October 2024

It seems like yesterday I was in eighth grade in 1969, sneaking over to the Northwestern University campus in Evanston, Illinois, watching students protest the alarming pollution of Lake Michigan, the endless war in Vietnam, pernicious injustices in our country, and a president who was lying to us. I even drove with my mother and younger brother to Washington, D.C., to join thousands of people in a May Day protest of the war. Ideals of a greater good and a healthier America were at an all-time high. Still ringing in our ears from the previous eight years was President John F. Kennedy's famous exhortation to the world, "Ask not what your country can do for you; but ask instead what you can do for your country."



During that time, service opportunities were abounding. Everyone wanted to become a doctor, lawyer, politician, or journalist, and do something that would serve the greater good of our country and make our world a better place. The Peace Corps and AmeriCorps were attracting Americans across our country by the thousands. Today, so much of that striving for the greater good seems to be disappearing, swallowed up by an insidious fear that someone is screwing us, taking away our privileges, stealing our dreams, threatening our money supply. Instead of striving for a greater good, we seem to be striving aggressively for the security of me and mine, putting our arms tightly around our possessions in panic, losing sight of God's call on our lives to serve others with open arms no matter the outcome or reward.

This massive panic and fear in our world today appear to be the direct result of people living without an active faith in God Almighty. We seem to have forgotten that God loves us and promises to be with us if we place our trust in him. If there is no God watching over us, supplying our most basic needs, then it is every person for themselves racing to be in command of whatever dwindling supplies or resources are still available. In this unfortunate, new spirit prevailing in our world today, faith and trust are thrown out the window in favor of bare-knuckled tactics to win whatever political or societal battle is in front of us. And before long, the following words of Christ can easily be forgotten, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But, among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42b-45)



So much of the American church today has become unhinged, sold out to the prevailing winds of worldly leaders who are using innocent church members for their own political purposes. Instead of searching diligently through the Scriptures for guidance from Jesus, to understand fully what he said and instructed, many church members today are tragically trusting drive-by politicians, amateur journalists, and shady vigilantes to tell them what Christianity teaches or means. They allow fear and a scarcity mentality to be their driving forces instead of love and a willing heart to serve others. They forget the famous words of the Apostle John when he wrote, "God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them...Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first." (1John 4:16b,18-19)

Worst of all, compromised church leaders today are interpreting Christianity in a most dangerous way, promoting what has become known as a "health and wealth" Gospel. Directly or indirectly, they are teaching that God wants to bless you and make you rich while also guaranteeing your good health with no suffering. Jesus never promised any of these things. In fact, he taught quite the opposite – that following him will involve pain, suffering, economic uncertainty, and most likely persecution, even martyrdom. Jesus warned his followers that worldly figures and compromised church leaders would tempt them to water down their faith for political and material gain. He prayed for their protection and discernment to know the difference between a good shepherd and corrupt one.

The other day, I was listening to a report on the state of global Christianity which mentioned something I will never forget. During the last 2,000 years, Christianity has become the largest religion in the world for several different reasons. But chief among them is the way persecution and martyrdom have contributed to noticeable advances in the global Church, especially in the last 50 years when Christians have been attacked by many different religious groups. It is sobering and incredibly inspiring to think about people willing to die for their faith rather than compromise it. These kinds of sacrifices serve the greater good and the advance of the Church at the highest level. Has our world lost this sense of service, obedience, humility, and putting others' interests above our own? Fifteen years ago, when Christians in Egypt were being attacked ruthlessly by an ISIS affiliate group, I remember reading about an Orthodox Coptic church which was bombed on Easter morning. A huge explosion went off in the middle of the sanctuary while a homily about the resurrection of Christ was being shared. In the immediate aftermath of this huge explosion, the priest was still standing in the middle of the church with burning debris and injured bodies all around him. With hardly missing a beat, he was reported to have said, "Praise God. I do not understand what just happened, but I will trust God to have the last loving word about it."

On a much more local, everyday level here in the US, I am saddened by the sudden and rapid increase of sports gambling and betting in our world today, a deliberate straying from a much

healthier moral order. It is eating away at the cherished tradition of being proud of your local or school team and causing people to care more about their bottom line of winning a bet on an individual player or game. And now college athletes are allowed to jump from one school to another depending on which institution will pay them more money and give them greater benefits and adulation. The individual is being exalted above the team. People care more about putting money in their bank accounts than seeing their team or town succeed. The purpose of sports is to develop character, humility, and an ability to serve the team above your own self interests. But those beautiful ideals are fading and eventually will leave us unless we refuse to go along with this growing, prevailing crowd.

The only way I know how to confront this fading from faith and the common good is to study the Bible in a group setting. Don't rely on a booklet, commentator, or even a trusted leader to interpret it for you. Think for yourself. Read it for yourself and become a member of a group which allows questions and inquiries to be freely expressed. And stay with it until you finish a book in the Bible, hopefully the entire New Testament, and even the whole Bible itself. It will change your life and give you new and valuable tools to discern the enticing, misguided, and sometimes dangerous messages in our world today.

Let's get back to being a team and not an exalted individual. Let's listen more than we speak. Let's serve more than being served. Let's take up our crosses and follow Christ to overcome and redeem the world. This is the invitation of Jesus, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is there anything worth more than your soul?" (Matthew 16:24b-26)



There is nothing more important than our souls. With God's help, let's hold tightly to this cherished guide for our lives. As we go bravely into our future together, may the Lord be with you, and our common pursuit of the greater good. Blessings from my family to yours during this always wonderful, upcoming holiday season.