

"Defending Democracy"  
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## THE READINGS

### Genesis IV:1-15

And Adam knew Eve, his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, "I have gotten a man from the Lord. And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? And why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. And Cain talked with his brother Abel: and it came to pass, when they were in the field. That Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.

And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not; Am I my brother's keeper? And He said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. When thou tilleth the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

[There are many interpretations of that story, some seeing it as addressing the cultural conflict between herders and farmers. I ask you to focus on the question, "Am I my brother's keeper" which countless sermons over the eons have understood as raising the religious question, "What responsibility do I have for the welfare of others?"

There is a commonality in the responses of the world's great religions to that question.]

In Judaism: "...thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

In Ancient Rome it was taught: "The law imprinted on the hearts of all men is to love the members of society as themselves."

In Christianity it has been expressed: Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

Muslim teaching that "None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."

Buddhist teachings include: "...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?"

The Confucian teacher Mencius asserted: "Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence."

The Hindu Mahabharata teaches: "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you."

A Native American proverb teaches: "Do not wrong or hate your neighbor. For it is not he who you wrong, but yourself."

A Secular response to that question is contained in the Preamble to the Constitution of The United States.

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America..*

## THE SERMON

[self-centeredness and compassion]

Why is it that so many religious traditions have so explicitly addressed the question of how people treat one another? History makes it clear that however universal expression of the principle of respecting the “other” is, it is “more honored in the breach than in the observance”—or, at least as often. But, we are not solitary animals and disregarding the value of others is not conducive to the strength of community. There is, however, an ongoing human struggle between self-centeredness and compassion. That struggle waxes and wanes from time to time - first one is in the ascendancy and then the other.

Beginning in the 1970's, the social critics Tom Wolfe and Christopher Lasch, among others, began speaking out critically against what they saw as a culture of narcissism which came to be known as “The Me Generation.” That trend has not diminished over the past half-century, but accelerated. It has been institutionalized.

John Kenneth Galbraith suggested that “The modern conservative is engaged in one of [humanity's] oldest exercises in moral philosophy; that is, the search for a superior moral justification for selfishness.” Increasingly, there have been successful attempts in the United States to change our cultural perspective on those words of the Constitution I read earlier:

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.*

The words of the Preamble are words of aspiration, not of accomplishment. It has been a process of two steps forward, one back. There has been progress since 1789, but we are not all in agreement as to how much has been forward and how much back. There is, not surprisingly, disagreement about the meanings of “justice,” “domestic tranquility,” “general welfare,” and “liberty.”

[the role of government?]

It is clear that there are those today who are questioning the involvement of our government in education, public health, economic equality, regulation of immigration, encouraging or restricting participation in elections, valuing labor, respecting scientific knowledge, and freedom of speech. The fundamental question of whether government is friend or foe has been opened to challenge. Our Constitution, and Democracy itself, have been called into question by some powerful forces within our society. As I suggested in the church newsletter, *Sometimes it's hard to see the forest through the trees. Most of us are aware of the various threats to democracy, but until I read Nancy MacLean's "Democracy in Chains," I did not realize what a serious threat we are facing.*

[In the newsletter, I noted that this will not be a partisan sermon. When I refer to Republicans, I will not mean the people who have traditionally identified with the Republican party. The reality is that in many, if not most, parts of the country today, what has been the Republican Party has been infiltrated and taken over for their own purposes by people whose political beliefs bear little resemblance to those of traditional Republicans. One need only look

at the number of elected Republicans who have been primaried out of office, or have seen fit to resign because they do not wish to be identified with where their party is today. The acronym RINO [Republican in name only] is used by both sides of the struggle for control of the party. Where there have always been differences in how Democrats and Republicans would go about implementing their vision, the gap between the parties today has widened and the differences are in the vision, not just implementation.]

[a stealth plan?]

I recently encountered the thorough 2017 study of what Nancy MacLean, a professor of History and Public Policy at Duke University, has referred to a “the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America.” in her **Democracy in Chains**. Her 240 pages of text are accompanied by a hundred pages of supporting references.

There are three central figures in her book: James McGill Buchanan, an economist whose name is not well known to most of us; and the better known Charles and David Koch who have spent millions and millions of dollars in active support of implementing Buchanan’s political philosophy through the founding and support of: The Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Citizens for a Sound Economy, Americans for Prosperity, Freedom Works, the Club for Growth, the State Policy Network, The Competitive Enterprise Institute, the Tax Foundation, the Reason Foundation, the Leadership Institute, The American Legislative Exchange Council better known as [ALEC], and, of course, the Tea Party Movement. Each of these allegedly separate but intricately connected organizations support the implementation of elements of Buchanan’s philosophy, which can be summarized as trying to recreate in America the elite culture, economy, and power structure of Virginia before the “War Between the States,” known by some as “The War of Northern Aggression.”

Buchanan summed up his philosophy and that of his followers to an interviewer with a simple sentence:

*I don’t want to control you and I don’t want to be controlled by you.*

MacLean notes:

*It sounds so reasonable, fair, and appealing. But. . . this cause defines the “you” its members do not want to be controlled by, as the majority of the American people, and its architects have never recognized economic power as a potential tool of domination: to them, unrestrained capitalism is freedom.*

The crystalizing event that energized this movement was the decision of the Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education, declaring separate, but allegedly equal, schools for black students to be illegal. Suddenly we had the government of the United States interfering in what felt to some like the core of Southern life. The initiation of Social Security and the Tennessee Valley Power Authority, Child Labor laws, and the recognition of labor unions – all of these have been seen by libertarians as encroaching on the liberty of individuals, but the Brown decision was a giant step too far in the eyes of some. Buchanan, who was then a professor at the University of Virginia, became a strong advocate of resistance to the court, and with the co-operation of the President of the University, he founded the Thomas Jefferson Center for

Political Economy and Social Philosophy to bring together academics who believed in individual liberty, as they understood it, above all else.

Key to Buchanan's economic philosophy is the belief that the masses want to milk successful people of what they have earned through their superior effort and qualities. Mitt Romney's politically fatal comment about the 47% of people who are "takers" as contrasted with the "makers" is an expression of that perspective. Buchanan and his followers believe that our government is made up of people who knuckle under to the demands of the lazy hordes to be taken care of, so that they, the bureaucrats can line their own pockets.

[the Libertarian perspective]

As Joseph Goebbels observed, "If you tell a great lie and repeat it often enough, the people will eventually come to believe it." There is abundant evidence in today's America of the truth of that assertion.

MacLean notes that in 2005, Buchanan wrote that people who failed to foresee and save money for their future needs, "Are to be treated as subordinate members of the species, akin to . . . animals who are dependent." He did not address the question of those who barely have enough to survive, much less save for the future. In the same vein, one of Buchanan's successors has declared:

With the "rewriting of the social contract" people will be expected to fend for themselves much more than they do now." While some will flourish "others will fall by the wayside." And because "worthy individuals" will manage to claw their way out of poverty, "that will make it easier to ignore those who are left behind.

MacLean notes:

*Those who subscribe to the libertarian philosophy believe that the only legitimate role of government is to ensure the rule of law, guarantee social order, and provide for the national defense.*

That means no more school lunches, no Medicare, no Medicaid, no pure water or clean air regulations, no concern about the environment, no requiring restaurant employees to wash their hands after using rest rooms, no free public education, no restriction on racial or sexual discrimination, the list goes on. Koch-funded organizations have been active in spreading junk science about the environment, akin to what the cigarette manufacturer's did for so many years. MacLean notes that by 2014, only 8 of 278 Republicans in Congress were willing to acknowledge that humans had any significant impact on the environment.

[fear of voting]

One of the two scariest things about this stealth movement to ignore the "public good" is its actions in regard to voting. Because they realize that so many poor people might vote in opposition to their conservative perspective, there has been an active movement to restrict access to voting by the poor and the idealistic young. America already stands 138<sup>th</sup> out of 172 democracies in voter turnout, but with the great conservative electoral victories in 2010, particularly in state governments, legislators backed by the Koch's ALEC introduced more than 180 bills to restrict access to voting. Wiping people from registration rolls, cutting the number of

polling places in poor neighborhoods, increasing identification requirements, reducing advance voting: the creativity in finding ways to allow fewer people to vote has been impressive.

[threat to the Constitution]

But MacLean addresses one of the most frightening challenges our democracy faces today. She asserts:

*The ultimate target of the well-heeled right's stealth plan, though, as Buchanan for so long urged, is the nation's most important rule book: the U.S. Constitution itself. . .*

Common Cause has tried to call the attention of the nation to the threat we are facing.

*A well-funded, highly coordinated national effort is underway to call a constitutional convention, under Article V of the U.S. Constitution, for the first time in history. The result of such a convention could be a complete overhaul of the Constitution and supporters of the convention are dangerously close to succeeding. With special interest groups gaining more momentum, conservative advocates are just six states short of reaching the constitutionally-required 34-state goal. They are . . . within striking distance.*

*The unknowns surrounding a constitutional convention pose an unacceptable risk, particularly in the current polarized political climate. Given how close calling a new convention is, it's time to spotlight that risk and sound an alarm for the preservation of our Constitution.*

*Too few Americans are even aware that a constitutional convention can be called, let alone that there would be no checks on its scope and further that the process to call one is well underway and being underwritten by some of the nation's richest individuals. [Which is to say the Kochs and their cohort.]*

The adoption of any amendments proposed by the convention would require only the approval of 38 state legislatures, many of which are now dominated by conservatives. We the people would have no say in who the delegates are or what the agenda would be. To be clear, there are some left-wing groups that also, I would say naively, support a Constitutional Convention.

[MacLean's conclusion]

MacLean concludes her book:

*The libertarian cause, from the time it first attracted wider support during the southern schools crisis, was never really about freedom as most people would define it. It was about the promotion of crippling division among the people so as to end any interference with what those who held vast power over others believed should be their prerogatives. Its leaders had no scruples about enlisting white supremacy to achieve capital supremacy. And today, knowing that the majority does not share their goals and would stop them if they understood the endgame, the team of paid operatives seeks to win by*

*stealth. Now, as then, the leaders seek . . . liberty for the few – the liberty to concentrate vast wealth, so as to deny elementary fairness and freedom to the many.*

She asks:

*Is this the country we want to live in and bequeath to our children and future generations? That is the real public choice. If we delay much longer, those who are imposing their stark utopia will choose for us. One of them has announced flatly: “America will soon make a decision about its future. It will be a permanent decision. There will be no going back. As we consider the future of our democracy in light of all that has happened already, we may take heed of a Koch maxim: “Playing it safe is slow suicide.”*

[George Will]

You may think this is an overreaction, and making too much of a fringe movement, but it was interesting to note George Will's nationally syndicated Washington Post column just last Sunday. While Will has certainly distanced himself from the present administration, he nonetheless praises James Buchanan's reactionary philosophy and urged Elizabeth Warren to read Buchanan's 2003 essay on “What is Public Choice Theory?” claiming that Buchanan “used economic reasoning – determining how incentives influence behavior – to demystify politics.” I would urge George Will to read MacLean's book which demystifies Buchanan's fantasy of the way things ought to be in America.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have found this exploration more than a little depressing. Is our democracy really in this much jeopardy?

[saved by Robert Reich]

I was saved by another discovery this week: **The Common Good**, the national bestseller by former Labor Secretary and insightful essayist Robert Reich, Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley.

Reich writes:

*The idea of “the common good” was once widely understood and accepted in America. After all, the US Constitution was designed for “We the people” seeking to “promote the general welfare” – not for “me the selfish jerk seeking as much wealth and power as possible. . . . The common good animated many of us – both white and black Americans – to fight for civil rights and voting rights in the 1960's. It inspired America to create the largest and most comprehensive system of public education the world had ever seen. . . .*

*Yet [he concedes] the common good is no longer a fashionable idea. The phrase is rarely uttered today, not even by commencement speakers and politicians. It feels slightly corny and antiquated if not irrelevant.*

While he acknowledges that:

*Americans sharply disagree about exactly what we want for America or for the world. [He insists] we must agree on basic principles – such as how we deal with our*

*disagreements, the importance of our democratic institutions, our obligations toward the law, and our respect for the truth – if we're to participate in the same society.*

Reich quotes the sermon delivered by John Winthrop to the Puritans, just before they landed in the New World in 1630 in which he urged:

*We must delight in each other, make each other's conditions our own, rejoice together, always having before our eyes . . . our community as members of the same body.*

Winthrop saw freedom not as a license to satisfy selfish wants but to do that “which is good, just, and honest.”

Reich is not naive. He traces many of the events which have denegated our belief in the “common good.” Although he is a Democrat, he is not blind to many of the ways in which Democrats have contributed to a loss of faith in the government, including the attacks on Robert Bork’s nomination to the Supreme Court and Barack Obama’s reliance on Executive Orders when Congress stonewalled several of his proposals, which Reich believes undercut the Constitution’s separation of powers. And Reich points painfully to the reliance of both parties on contributions from major donors whose donations carry an expectation of reciprocity, the result of which has been the redistribution of money from the poor and middle class upward to the 1%. While in 1963 over 60 percent of Americans trusted the government to do the right thing all or most of the time. “Nowadays,” he says “79 percent believe the government is run ‘by a few big interests’ and just 19 percent say government is run ‘for the benefit of all.’”

I said Reich made me feel better. It’s coming.

Acknowledging that:

*[G]iven the serious depletion of the pool of trust on which our society depends, reversing the whatever-it-takes forces that have eroded the common good during the past half century poses a daunting challenge. . . . So we have to go deeper, back to the attitudes and understandings that shape public morality in the hopes of possibly strengthening them.*

Reich is no Pollyanna. He is a realist – not a dreamer. Yet he still conveys what I find to be a realistic hope that we are not done yet – that we can still find leaders who can inspire us to remember the common good. He writes:

The common good, as I have emphasized, is a set of shared commitments – to the rule of law, and to the spirit as well as the letter of the law; to our democratic institutions of government; to truth; to tolerance of our differences; to equal political rights and equal opportunity; to participating in our civic life, and making necessary sacrifices for the ideals we hold in common. We must share these commitments if we are to have a functioning society. They inform our judgements about right and wrong because they constitute our common good. Without them, there is no “we.”

One can still observe the seeds of commitment to the common good whenever there are tragedies in which Americans leap to the aid of one another without regard to race or economic status. Those seeds need nurturing!

[the Fifth UU Principle]

The fifth principle of the religious Association of which this congregation is a part calls upon us to affirm and promote:

*The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process without our congregations and in society at large.*

This is a statement of our religious commitment to the vision of common good advanced by so many of the great religions.

It is easy to despair and to retreat to our cocoons, wringing our hands at how awful things are. It is something else to declare that there are things more important than our personal comfort, and more productive than licking our wounds. The re-establishment of belief in the common good and defending our democracy from the real threats it is facing will not be easy, but not trying to accomplish it would have a worse outcome.

[Dorothy Day and Margaret Mead]

Dorothy Day, the great Roman Catholic worker for justice pointed out:

*People say,, "what is the sense of our small effort?". They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread out in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that. No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.*

And then there is this reminder from Margaret Mead:

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*