

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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## **“Working for the Good of All”**

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)**

**July 7, 2013**

**Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1–10**

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Without a doubt, one of the most beautiful public buildings that I think I've seen is the Chicago Cultural Center across Michigan Avenue from Millennium Park. My husband and I were recently in Chicago following Easter for some much needed vacation time together, and we revisited this beautiful building, originally the Chicago Public Library, which began construction in 1892, just twenty-one years after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Durham may have bulls and likeness of bulls all over our city, but just outside the Chicago Cultural Center stands a bronze cow, a fitting reminder of the one which allegedly kicked the bucket that started the Great Chicago Fire.

Thus rising from the ashes of devastation, I think it is one of the most jaw-dropping public buildings in the United States.

British philanthropist A.H. Burgess of London sent a gift of condolence to the city following the fire, an “English Book Donation,” saying in the *Tribune* on December 7, 1871, “I propose that England should present a Free Library to Chicago to remain there as a mark of sympathy now, and a keepsake and a token of true brotherly kindness forever.”

([www.chipublib.org/aboutcpl/history/index.php](http://www.chipublib.org/aboutcpl/history/index.php))

A Brit didn't have to do that... especially considering how we treated them in the years leading up to 1776.

I wonder what possessed this man to reach across the great pond like this?

At any rate, the design of the structure took a year to complete from approximately 1,200 drawings with the assurance following the fire that this building would be practically incombustible.

The building is capped with two stained glass domes set symmetrically atop its two wings, one of them being the world's largest Tiffany Glass dome, 38-feet across, with hanging lamps.

The walls are covered with mosaics of colored stone, mother of pearl and Favrite glass which feature inscriptions of authors and quotations that praise learning.

The grand staircases are made of white and pink marble, the ceilings are heavily ornamented and coffered, and the doors are of polished mahogany.

The finest architects, the finest materials, the finest features went into this building for the general public to use and enjoy.

*Everything about it makes you want to keep looking up* and marvel at the wisdom of our forebears who wanted the most beautiful, the most enduring, the most thought-provoking, the most aesthetically pleasing edifice for the most people to enjoy and for the general public to use.

Of course there are other structures in our nation that are equally beautiful:

the public library in Cleveland is extraordinary, as is Grand Central Station in New York, just to name a few.

But the thing that intrigues me most about these structures is that they were built using our best talent and our best materials, not skimping, not cutting corners, *to serve the common good.*

Using Paul's wording from his Epistle to the Galatians, they are human works, *for the good of all.*

And I lament that I don't see beautiful public structures like these being built any more.

Our National Parks, too, were established to preserve some of our most beautiful landmarks and set them aside for the general public to enjoy.

I have visited four or five of them: Great Smoky Mountains here in North Carolina,

Yosemite in California, Grand Canyon in Arizona, Glacier in Montana and Canada. One of my goals in life is to visit as many of them as possible before I kick the bucket! Yellowstone National Park is next on my bucket list; Redwoods National Park is close behind.

These parks were bought at a great price and have been maintained at great cost to preserve some of the most scenic and rustic natural wonders in our country for the general public to enjoy and learn from.

Sarah Finbow reminded me that our National Hymn, "America, The Beautiful," was originally penned in 1895 by Katharine Lee Bates under the title, "Pikes Peak" – the purple mountain majesty to which it refers.

However, according to Richard Louv in *Last Child in the Woods*, some of our largest parks are reporting a peculiar drop-off in attendance over the past few years.

According to Louv, overall visits to our national parks, which grew steadily since the 1930s, have dropped approximately 25 percent between 1987 and 2003.

Yosemite National Park drew nearly 20 percent fewer people since its peak attendance, even with California adding 7 million residents.

The number of visitors topped out at Grand Canyon in 1991, at Yellowstone in 1992, at Oregon's Crater Lake in 1995, and at Mount Rainier in 1991.

Since the late 1980s, the number of Carlsbad Caverns National Park visitors plummeted by nearly half.

The reason for the decline, Louv believes, is the break between the young and nature due to the increased time Americans spend plugged into electronics.

Researchers call this phenomena "videophilia" – a shift from loving streams to loving screens. (Richard Louv. *Last Child in the Woods*, p. 147-148)

But I digress. My point is this: these natural points of interest were purchased, set aside, and preserved *for the general public, for the common good*, for our environmental health, for our public sense of wholeness.

They are nature's works, *for the good of all*.

And I lament that we are losing the public usage of these natural wonders.

And public education? I graduated from the Charlotte/Mecklenburg public schools.

All of my children went through various public school systems:

Wake County, Forsyth County, Kanawha County, West Virginia,  
Decatur, Georgia Public Schools, Durham Public Schools.

They were in school with children who ate breakfast and lunch at school,  
with children who went to middle school pregnant and then as young parents,  
with children from foreign countries who could not speak English,  
with children with learning disabilities, with physical disabilities,  
with children whose parents never had been to college,  
with children who graduated with high honors, and with those who never graduated.

These children were all part of my children's education into the human condition.

Our public school system in America was a great experiment *for the common good*,  
for the sake of developing a democratic nation of readers and thinkers.

It was meant to work *for the good of all children, equally, and not just for some*.

And I lament that we are losing the public side of education,  
and I fear we are becoming elitist in our educational strivings.

I've always wondered if the Church, this church in particular, should not only  
be concerned about Christian Education, but should also equally be concerned  
as Christians *for* public education?

I've always wondered if we should allocate what is leftover of our Christian Education  
budget at the end of each year to the Durham Public Schools.

If you think this is a good idea, let me know.

If you think this is a stupid idea, let me know that, too.

The Apostle Paul sums up his address to the Galatians with these final exhortations  
from today's text.

In the previous chapter of Galatians, he spoke about the value of freedom, saying:

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;*

*only do **not** use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,  
but through love become slaves to one another. (5:13)*

In other words, as Christians, yes we have been freed *from* bondage to sin and death,  
but we are freed *from* these constraints in order to be free *for* one another;  
we are freed *from* our burdens to be free *for* bearing one another's burdens;  
we are freed *from* pride in our own success to be free *for* valuing the common success of all;  
we are freed *from* self-love only to be free *for* loving our neighbor as ourselves.  
And NOW is the time to use our Christian freedom **not** to escape responsibility,  
but to deploy ourselves, our time, our talents, *for the common good of all*.  
Twice, in vv. 9 and 10, Paul uses the Greek word, *kairos*, for time,  
meaning a quality of God-time, kingdom time, that demands action in the present.  
According to Paul, the authentic Christian life humbly devotes itself  
to the benefit of others, to the public, sharing and receiving whatever is helpful,  
and protecting the fragile in our midst.

Jim Wallis, in his book, *On God's Side*, says this:

“For Christians, the idea of the common good derives  
from Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor – including 'the least of these' –  
which is still the most transformational social ethic the world has ever seen.

But all our faith traditions agree that loving our neighbor  
is required if we say we love God.

Making our treatment of the most vulnerable  
the moral test of any society's 'righteousness' or integrity  
is ultimately the best way to make absolutely sure that we are protecting  
the human life and dignity of all God's children.

A commitment to the common good is also the best way  
to find common ground with other people – even with those who don't agree with us  
or share our faith commitment. (Jim Wallis. *On God's Side*, preface)

*Those who are taught the word must share in all good things*, Paul says,  
and I would interpret this to include our magnificent man-made structures,  
the natural beauty of our parks and streams,  
and the right to obtain a proper and decent education, among other public benefits.

A few weeks ago we lost an honorable North Carolinian, a Presbyterian, a Republican,

who I think was an incredible advocate for *the good of all*

in the way that Paul intends in his letter to the Galatians.

Former Governor Jim Holshouser, Jr., a native of Boone, NC, was the first Republican elected governor of the state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, serving one term from 1973–1977.

During his tenure, he ushered in an era of two-party politics after decades of Democratic dominance,

working on bipartisan efforts to improve education and to preserve a volunteer public campaign finance program for appellate court candidates.

He spent more than 30 years sitting on the University of North Carolina's Board of Governors, promoting our state's great public universities.

Four-term Democrat Governor Jim Hunt said about Holshouser:

“He was a good strong Republican, but he was also a good strong advocate for public education and for the environment and for the fair treatment of all people.

I worked with a lot of governors over my lifetime and I know

I have never known one who was a finer human being.”

(Editorial, “James Holshouser Jr.'s 'gentlemanly style,’” *The Herald Sun*, 6/19/13)

Said a *Herald Sun* editorial about Holshouser:

“He exemplified a brand of moderation and cooperation that has been in achingly short supply in both parties in the more overheated climate of recent years...

We would do well to not just mourn Mr. Holshouser, but to honor his memory by emulating his spirit and sense of service.”

(Editorial, “James Holshouser Jr.'s 'gentlemanly style,’” *The Herald Sun*, 6/19/13)

But the words about Jim Holshouser that pulled me up short, that caught my breath, that spoke to the heart of my own heart, were voiced by his pastor,

Presbyterian minister Grady Perryman, at his funeral service at Brownson Memorial Presbyterian Church in Southern Pines.

According to Perryman's eulogy, “He (Holshouser) gave politicians a good name.”

He helped underwrite a translation of the Bible into a Mexican dialect and kept an edition in his den.

Holshouser was not the kind of person to flaunt his titles.

"The only label that really mattered to him was... 'child of God.'"

(Gary D. Robertson. "Holshouser remembered for political work, faith". *The Herald Sun*,  
June 22, 2013)

Isn't that extraordinary?

The only label that really mattered to him was... "child of God."

Isn't that just stunning?

The only title that mattered to him was... "child of God."

The primary identity that mattered to this very accomplished man  
was his baptismal identity as a child of God.

Everything else, every word, every deed, every intent,  
flowed out of that claiming, that initiating, that inspiring, that motivating,  
that calling as a "child of God."

We pass over these words so lightly as we exit the font with a dripping, wet,  
squirming child in our arms saying, "See what great love God has for us,  
that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1)

It gives me chills to hear that someone would wear that nomenclature his whole life,  
that someone would remember words sealed upon his brow  
before he probably could even understand English,  
that someone would live into that identity so completely that he or she  
would be unable to separate church from state, even when he or she  
believed it to be a constitutional mandate,  
that someone would be so touched by the God-water that touches all,  
so touched by the God-water that makes up all,  
so touched by the God-water that refreshes, renews, and restores all  
that he or she would then be compelled, like Jesus, to work for the good of all,  
the common good, the public good, the greater good,  
to the greater glory of God. Amen.