

“Neighborliness”

Recently, a politician remarked that one person’s socialism is another person’s neighborliness. To be sure, the command to love our neighbor requires us to consider the oppressed, the poor, the widow, and the orphan among us. But is socialism the same as being a good neighbor? No. Socialism and neighborliness are antithetical for three reasons.

First, socialism advocates collective ownership, but neighborliness assumes personal ownership. Merriam-Webster defines socialism as an “economic theory that advocates collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods.” Socialism assumes that the government or some other collective is the sole owner and organizer of everything.

In contrast, neighborliness assumes personal ownership. The 8th commandment—thou shall not steal—implies private property. Personal ownership is impossible if a person’s hands are owned by somebody else. In fact, this was part of the argument Abraham Lincoln made against slavery: a person’s right to work and keep what she has earned treats one as an equal. The great example of the apostles willing to help others in need is because each apostle owned and possessed things, they were willing to help others in need (Acts 2:44; 4:32).

Second, socialism is forced but neighborliness is voluntary. As the sole owner and organizer of everything, socialism forces control of production and distribution. This proves fatal to human dignity, liberty, and virtue. Forced virtue is not true virtue, since good works are freely practice. One can practice kindness toward someone else because it is freely chosen. Personal ownership makes possible independence, self-reliance, and the opportunity to practice virtue. A great example is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). We are told that a Samaritan treats the injured man, brings him to an inn, and pays the innkeeper. All of

this was done without forced government production or distribution. Instead, it was done voluntarily for a neighbor. The freely practiced acts of kindness by the Samaritan made possible the virtue exhibited. Neighborliness is the voluntary free act to help one another without expecting a benefit in return.

Third, socialism assumes that the greatest goods of a person are the materialist needs. But a person is more than his belly. A person has a soul created by God and meant to enjoy Him forever. This extraordinary revelation is not found in socialism. Neighborliness has a divine direction. It reveals a sovereign Lord above the nations who gave the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor includes material needs without neglecting the spiritual needs, for a person is both body and soul. By teaching the reality of the soul and the need for its care, it directs a person to the greatest good, which is communion with God.

Socialism and neighborliness are fundamentally at odds with each other. We will be truthful and better off if we keep them separate.

Judson Marvel

Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA)