THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WHO'S ON GOD'S SIDE?

RECLAIMING A VISION OF THE COMMON GOOD

A CONVERSATION WITH SOJOURNERS CEO JIM WALLIS

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PARTICIPANTS:

Introduction and Moderator:

E.J. DIONNE
Senior Fellow
The Brookings Institution

Featured Speaker:

JIM WALLIS
Chief Executive Officer, Sojourners
Editor in Chief, *Sojourners Magazine*

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. DIONNE: Welcome. I guess we'll begin.

Thank you all for coming. It's a personal please and joy to be doing this event with Jim Wallis, who is someone I have admired for years. I admired him long before I met him, and then -- and this doesn't always happen in life -- I admired him more after I met him, which is a good thing.

This session is under the auspices of Sojourners, and our Brookings project on Religion, Policy, and Politics, which I work on with my dear and good colleague Bill Galston -- and there is a lot of religion, policy, and politics in this book. For those of you who are close enough, you will see that I have a lot of stickers in the book. And if I did every sticker in the book, we'd be here all night.

You'll note there were two colors. There is no significance to this, except that I found so much interesting in the book that I ran out of yellow stickers, and had to start using orange stickers. So that's a real tribute to this book -- which I think, for Jim -- Jim always writes good books. I think this really is the most important book he's written since *God's Politics*, a book which many of you know, and really hit the country at precisely the right moment -- at a moment, I always like to say, when Democrats discovered God in the exit polls of the 2004 election. And since God can be discovered anywhere, that's perfectly okay.

The other thing I want to say is, one of the powerful things about what Jim does in this book -- and he will tell you about it himself -- is, in talking about the common good, Jim is widely and correctly seen, I think, as a leader of the religious progressive movement in America. But this is also very much a common-ground book. And Jim has been somebody who has sought common ground with -- sought civil argument with -- that's probably even harder than "common ground," but also formed

alliances with all kinds of people. And the only criterion for Jim has been: does this alliance serve the common good?

And he has some wonderful suggestions about how we might approach politics differently, even as he has very strong convictions about where he thinks we need to go.

This book reminded me of one of my favorite quotations on what a good society looks like when it comes to politics. It's from a writer called Glenn Tinder, whom some of you might know. And Glenn Tinder said our purpose should be to create the "attentive society." And he defined the "attentive society" as "a place that leaves room for strong conviction, but where everyone acknowledges the need, both to give and receive help on the road to truth."

And I think Jim is very much an "attentive society" kind of guy.

Just so you know how we'll proceed, Jim is going to talk about his book. Are there any Aslan fans in the audience? Yes. Well, I'm going to ask him about the role of Aslan in this book. He does not propose that Aslan run in a party primary, but he plays -- that lion plays an important role here.

So, I'll introduce Jim. He'll give a talk. Then we'll chat for a bit. And then we will bring all of you into the conversation. And you can ask anything you want, but it would be good if some folks in the audience focused on, well, what would a common-good politics look like? Does that concept mean anything right now? And I think it still does. I think it's the right idea. But I'd be curious -- when I say, "Does it mean anything?" what I really mean is, is it possible in the current political environment?

So, as you all know, Jim is the CEO of Sojourners. He's a best-selling author. He's a public theologian, speaker, international commentator on ethics in public

life. He recently served on President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

He currently serves as the chair of the Global Agenda Council on Faith for the World Economic Forum. And he does that even though he's not a global billionaire -- very impressive.

I also love to say Jim's wife, Joy, is an absolutely wonderful person. She is one of the first women ordained in the Anglican Church. And for Downton Abbey fans, there was a very well known BBC show called the "Vicar of Dibley," which is modeled after Joy.

He, before writing *On God's Side*, his new book that we're talking about today -- On God's Side: *What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn't Learned About Serving the Common* Good -- his most recent book was *Revisiting Values on Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street: A Moral Compass for the New Economy*. He's written a whole lot of other books, including *God's Politics*.

He is widely seen on TV, radio. He's been on everything from The O'Reilly Factor to Hardball, to Meet the Press, to the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. So he has really made it.

And the last thing I want to say about Jim is it's probably too early to call him a prophet. I think we need a couple of hundred years before we call someone a prophet. But I really think it's fair to say that Jim has been prophetic in his ministry for a very, very long time. I think he saw the shape of what the world of religion and politics and be long before others did. The progressive side, he was out in the wilderness for many years, reminding progressives that religious people had a lot of things to say about politics that did not automatically fall on the right side of the political agenda. And yet, as I said, he's always, in a Christian spirit, kept his lines open to everyone.

It's a real pleasure to introduce Jim, and to be his friend.

Jim Wallis. (Applause)

MR. WALLIS: Well, it's a delight to be back at Brookings. I love being at this place -- and to be with E.J., who's my dear friend. But also, really, everyone knows, literally the best moderator in Washington, D.C. (Applause) It's true. It's really true -- and my favorite columnist. And I read most all of them. But when E.J.'s voice speaks, it just always resonates with my spirit and my soul. So, we like to hang out together, so this is another excuse. So, thank you, E.J.

When I finished this book, I came home from this sabbatical, and I picked up E.J.'s new book about *America's Divided Heart*. And I realized, after reading it through, that my book's kind of a, I think, a kind of a spiritual companion to that book. It's a brilliant book at the politics and history of how we've got the whole balance wrong between, you know, individual liberty and, really, the common good. And so I recommend that book to you all. If you haven't read it, read it right away.

This title is -- it's kind of a big title. I sometimes get embarrassed by the titles of these books, but what does it mean to be "on God's side?" That's a hard question. It's not an easy question.

And what do we mean by "the common good?" That's also not easy.

But I think these are the right questions. And I hope they provide a framework -- for not "certainty," but some serious reflection about what they both mean.

Now, E.J.'s column last week was on opening day -- or this week, opening day. He didn't mention I'm a little-league baseball coach, as well.

MR. DIONNE: A grave oversight. Believe me.

MR. WALLIS: And I'll be coaching all through the book tour. I'm home every Saturday for the game, my son Jack's team. So I have these 10-year-olds. So,

opening day's a big deal in our family. Joy, my wife, who's known as the real Vicar of Dibley in Britain, she's also the baseball commissioner of Northwest Little League, now, as a Brit. And we have a sign that she puts out every spring that says, "This family has been interrupted by the baseball season." And that's been put out now.

So, let me start with a baseball story, actually, from the book. It's in the book.

So, I was coaching the team, Tigers, my home town, Detroit -- Tigers we are -- last spring, and -- last fall, actually, last fall. And this team, well, they were the youngest team in our division, and they were struggling. And we'd lost the first four games. And the fifth one didn't look very good, about the fifth inning at all. The top of the order had gone down, and all of a sudden, two of the kids who never get on base got walked, due to no fault of their own.

And then, probably the worst player of the team -- only because he's an international kid, and never played baseball, parents don't have a clue -- he got up there, and somehow the bat -- the ball hit the bat, you know. And the ball went to the outfield. And he got to second base, and two runs scored, you know -- 5-2. And Stephan is his name, and Stephan is British, like my wife, you know, very polite. So, he walked over to shake hands with the shortstop.

So, I'm yelling, "Stephan, you gotta stay on the base." And he said, "Oh, I've never been here before."

Well, that began the rally. They all began to hit, and we won, 11 to 5, big rally. And that turned the whole season around. So I gave Stephan the game ball. Afterwards, we have these team meetings, and the parents, they joke about my delivering sermons at the team meetings -- but mostly, I let the kids talk, and here's what

they said. They said, "Sometimes you get what you need from unexpected places. All of us were needed for this game today. We all were part of this."

And then my star player said, "You know, it just goes to show you, you can never give up on hope."

So I tell this story in the book -- there's a new book out this week about how baseball -- you wrote about this -- baseball is the road to God.

Well, Joy's new book's going to be called "The Diamond is my Altar," she tells me.

So, this notion -- so I wrote the book, I began with a sabbatical, that's what was different about this book. And I went to monastery for a week to begin, and just to slow down. And I'll tell you, when you take some time away from the news cycle, and the political events, and the discipline for me was not to engage -- so I didn't write, I didn't speak, I didn't do interviews, I just -- all day, I'd get up very early in the morning, for walks, and sunrise, and some exercise, and some prayer, and then I would work all day. And then I'd watch the news cycle at night. And being disengaged, and watching that, I got more and more depressed, during an election year, about our political narrative -- the vitriol, the attacks, the blaming, not governing, but just trying to win. It just -- we were never going to solve anything, the way we were talking.

And, to be honest, you know, you'd flip the channels, and the politics were different, but the tone was more and more the same in the conversations.

And so the more I dug into this, I discovered the deeper meaning of this ancient, ancient idea, that goes back so far, called "the common good," which I think is more timely now than ever before in my lifetime.

So, I found this quote. "This is the rule of the most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point: namely, the seeking of the common good. For

nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighborhoods." The quote's by John Chrysostom, an early church father, 347 to 407. It goes way back in Catholic social teaching, in Judaism, tikkun, shalom, in Islam, in the Black churches, which have lived this for years, holding whole neighborhoods together, being the glue that holds whole cities together in the evangelical revivals.

But it's also in our secular, democratic traditions -- promoting the general welfare -- which E.J. wrote about in his book. This common good is in our religious traditions, but also in our democratic ones, and this could bring us together, the Golden Rule.

You know, this notion, you know, was always -- lawyers are always asking Jesus questions in the Bible, the gospels. I always want to -- when I hear the question, I always thing they're Washington lawyers, you know. So, "What are you about? What's your -- " -- and he says, "Well, it's the law. It's summed up, you love God with all your heart, your soul, and your strength. And then you love your neighbor as yourself." All our traditions you can't love God and not love your neighbor. They all say that.

Now, what that means, really, it means it's okay to love my son Luke, the 14-year-old, as much as I do -- first year of high school -- and Jack, fourth grade, it's okay to love them as much as I do. But it says, it means, that I've got to love other people's kids as much as I love my own. That is an utterly transformative ethic.

And that's the spiritual foundation for the "common good." However we get there, that's the foundation for it.

Now, we've lost that sense of looking at each other as other people, as other Americans, people of faith, brothers and sisters. Differing opinions have become

our worst enemies, as our parties have devolved into pettiness and, really, a terrible vitriol. And somehow we've lost a sense of being in this together.

And I would suggest -- and E.J. actually wrote about this historically -- when we are only looking after ourselves, our group, our tribe, our party, we will all soon be in serious trouble. It's only when we can find a way to look after each other -- whether or not we agree with each other on everything -- and figure out what's best for the common good, only then do we get to, I think, a better place.

Now, I want to give some examples of this so it isn't just -- what I don't want to suggest is, you know, "Washington, D.C. can never get it right. Read this book. This is how you do it. They should read it and get it right." It's a lot more complicated than that.

But let me tell you a story from last summer that illustrates -- this is in the book -- it's the story of a week last summer, in June.

We'd been working for over a year on this thing called the "Evangelical Immigration Table." And so, on a Tuesday in June, we came together to have a press conference. You had Sojourners, and the Southern Baptists were there, Richard Land and I. You had the National Association of Evangelicals. You had all the leading Hispanic evangelical leaders, and the Anglo pastors -- very famous. And on the Saturday before the Tuesday, I get contacted by Jim Daly, the new president of Focus on the Family, from Colorado Springs. And Jim said, "Can I join you?" And they did. So Focus on the Family joined us. Great coverage in the Hispanic press and the English press.

White House meeting that day, that afternoon and they said, you know, Jim, we are with you. I said, "Yeah? Your heart's in the right place, but you haven't shown much courage on this at all. You really haven't. It's time to show some courage." That was a Tuesday.

In this town, you don't expect things to change too quickly. But on Friday, I got a call at 7 a.m. They're all around the table, there at the White House, they're saying, "We wanted to brief you on what's going to happen today." The President is going to defer deportation of all the young people who came here before they were 16 -- almost a million-and-a-half. The dreamers, the young kids -- defer their deportation.

But the White House was terrified of the response, and the results, and "Could you get statements out from all of your people?" And so we did.

On Sunday, I got these calls and e-mails, and face-to-face tearful conversations with churches all over the country, Anglo and Hispanic, and they were dancing and singing and praising God, and just -- together, in their churches. And it was Father's Day. And a whole lot of dads for the first time were no longer worried their kids would be sent away from them.

The Sunday shows, you had conservative commentators, Bill Kristol, others, said, "This is good policy. We should have done this a long time ago." They were right. We should have.

On Monday, the pollsters showed that 70 percent of the American people -- 70 percent -- were in favor of what happened on Friday. Only 30 percent opposed.

The White House said clearly on Friday, "If you faith leaders hadn't done this on Tuesday, we couldn't have -- wouldn't have -- done this on Friday. You provided..." -- quote -- "... the space and the support for doing this."

The role of the faith community, at its best, is to provide two things for politics: one, moral courage, the other, political cover.

So we came last fall to town, "Bibles, badges, and business," we called it -- faith leaders, law enforcement, and business people. The Chamber of Commerce and Sojourners have been in the same room doing strategy on immigration reform.

And so we had these meetings, Republicans, Democrats. And you know their names, the ones doing this, and they literally look in the eyes and they said, in back-to-back meetings, they said, "You know, Jim, normally the way we would do this is do it in a way that would help win us the next election. To be honest, that's how we would do it. But on this one, we're promising you faith leaders that we're going to do what is necessary to find a bipartisan solution to fix this broken system, and protect those people that you all are most concerned about."

So, this little book tour this week, and I'm watching the news -- and not on the religion page, but in the news section, and all day long the news is about how this may be -- you know, E.J. and I care a lot about the gun violence question. I don't know what's going to happen there. I don't really know. We're going to see. We're going to be real involved in that.

The sequester issue is why people are do distrustful of this town, and their inability to find a sustainable path to our fiscal soul that's respective of our deepest values. Ideology wins again and again. Fighting about the role of government wins again and again.

But on this one, I think we're going to have immigration reform before the August recess. That's what I think. It won't be easy. There are issues -- guest worker issues -- but every time there's an issue, the same people, the same politicians, the same people who can't do anything else, "Do this now." The President met with about 12 interfaith leaders two weeks ago, and he said, yeah, this is political, and the vote, the election, was a big part of this, and -- to paraphrase what E.J. said before -- there are a lot of Republicans who saw the future of immigration reform, and the results of the election, and the increased Hispanic vote. That's true. But as the President said that day-- but that's not all that's true. There's a moral agenda here that's being raised by the

faith community. And before the Hispanic vote changed the election, these evangelicals were changing.

And so last week, the last week of Lent, I was talking to people who -- well, some of them were workers in the orchards, and the fields, and they're all studying their Bibles, which is not unusual for that community, but they're doing the same passages as a lot of white, evangelical Anglo churches, a thing called "I was a stranger," we were doing it together around the country, and members of Congress were doing it with some of the people in their constituency, in their churches.

And I think this issue is going to show how we can, in fact, get to the common good.

But it takes the kind of the pressure from the outside. Washington, D.C., is where it happens last. Every major social movement in our history has never begun here. It comes last here, and the common good always comes from outside. This isn't just about policy; it's about how we make our decisions. It's about how to inspire the common good, but also, then, how to practice it in relationship to big issues like the economy. We've lost any sense of trust in our economy.

At Davos, we're talking about -- we're just launching this year something called a "New Social Covenant." I talk about that in the book. We've got a broken social contract. All the contracts are broken. We need -- I'm told by business people, now -- a new social covenant. So we're having a discussion -- at Georgetown in the fall, we have a big conference on this -- all over the world about what it means to think about, to make our choices about values very self-conscious. When we make decisions, values will shape our decisions.

So, the three values of the covenant are: human dignity, the common good, and this notion of stewardship -- of the planet and our posterity. That's in the document. And CEOs are talking about that.

The role of government -- I'm so weary, and E.J. more than me, I'm sure -- of this argument, big and small government. That is the wrong question. This whole chapter of the book is about what is the purpose of government? Not the size, the purpose, the role of government. And I just do a lot of Biblical study about Romans 13, and all the rest, and government is concerned about fairness: courts, judicial system, processes -- because our human inclinations and human sinfulness make things unfair, inevitably. And so government is to make things more fair. And it says, in particular, in the scriptures, it's intended to protect the poorest and the most vulnerable. That's the job of government. Anyone who says no is not being -- as we say in the evangelical world -- Biblical, because it's there.

Or democracy -- I mean, let's talk about democracy. The checks have replaced all the balances in our political life. Democracy began in this country with white, landed men being able to vote. That was it. Then all white men. Then, finally, women. Then, finally, in 1965, African-Americans. And then we got South Africa, and Nelson Mandela, and now we have one-person-one-vote, right? Really.

John Kerry once told me that he had to raise $20,000 every day to get reelected in this country as a Senator -- okay? Until we deal with money in politics, we won't yet be living in a democracy. So we talk about that in this book.

But then we talk about things like households. I think -- and I'm speaking as a dad, and a little-league coach -- I think the decisions we make, choices we make, as moms and dads, husbands and wives, parents, kids, those decisions are as critical to the common good as anything in politics.

The households we live in are the place where the market aims to raise our appetites. But for us, it's the place where we teach our kids values over appetites. Very different thing. What does that really look like and mean?

And so the book tries to ask this question in relationship to all of these things that are going on.

Now, while this book tour -- we've got, I think, 16 cities, and 2 more on the way, and we've got 40 events, and we had one in New York last night, and one more in New York this week -- and it's like this common-good forum. And every place we go, we're having people who are doing it, I think, in those cities, practicing this, getting up on the stage and having a conversation about what this means, what this would look like in their cities, in their towns, in their communities. Because it's going to happen that way.

So, I don't have all the answers. I really don't. But I think these are the right questions.

So, how do we find this way to have the conversation? Michael Gerson, who also is a columnist that I like and enjoy, and I'm friends with, made a wonderful comment in the back of the book. He says, "Jim Wallis and I have a variety of differences on domestic and international policy, but there is no message more timely or urgent than his call to actively consider the common good. This could be a framework to find common ground for the common good."

The opening sentence of the book, I'll close with right now, and then we'll open it up to you -- the opening sentence, I think, expresses the hunger that many, many people feel. It just says, "Our life together can be better."

Thank you very much. (Applause)

MR. DIONNE: You all liked the "checks that replace the balances," that line, as much as I did. And one of the great things about that line is the word "checks" works -- either meaning of the word "checks" in that sentence.

And I also just want to read -- Jim has captured, at the beginning of a number of, of all his chapters, some very interesting, some great and inspiring, but also thought-provoking quotations.

And he has a chapter in the book called "A Servant Government." And there he has one of my many favorite Reinhold Niebuhr quotes, but he also has a quote that I had not seen before from C.S. Lewis, about the nature of democracy, which I think is worth sort of listening to in our town. The Niebuhr quote, many of you know: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

And C.S. Lewis kind of explains that. I quote C.S. Lewis here: "I am a democrat..." -- that was with a small "d." I think he was actually a Tory, C.S. Lewis, but, "I am a democrat..." -- a proponent of democracy -- "...because I believe in the Fall of Man. I think most people are democrats for the opposite reason. A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people like Rousseau, who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government. The real reason for democracy is the reverse: mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows." And then this great line, which I did remember, "I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters." Amen.

I just want to start with C.S. Lewis briefly, because I want this book to sell as much as the *Narnia* tales have sold.

Could you talk a little bit about your encounter with Aslan? Because I think it's just a very interesting -- one of the reasons I like this book a lot is because you put more of yourself in here than you have, sort of personal reflections in here, and your reflections on that great lion were very useful, I thought, to me.

MR. WALLIS: I started the sabbatical at the advice of a dear friend to go to a monastery for a week, and I went to the Camaldoli's monastery in Bug Sur, on the Pacific, in California. It's one of my favorite -- I love that part of the coast, I always go there when I can. But just sit up on top of that mountain and run up and down the hill every day. And all I did was, you know, spend time with the monks, early in the morning, all through the prayers, all day.

But in the guest library, it's in the kitchen, it's not a very spectacular library. But down on the bottom shelf were the *Narnia Chronicles*, the complete paperback set. Now I, of course, read them to my kids, but I said this would be fun. So, I got *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* one day and read it in the afternoon. And I ended up reading through all the *Narnia Chronicles* again during that week.

And, I'm sure, up in those redwoods, and all that, it looked and felt a bit like Narnia. And Aslan has always been important to me -- the Christ figure in the story -- it sometimes almost felt like Aslan was walking alongside, you know, up and down those mountains.

And I saw, he really was the leader of the common good in Narnia, to be a Narnian, what it means to be a Narnian. And it's about -- his conversations with people were about the most personal kinds of things, their vocation, their choices, their loves, and yet also about the most cosmic of things -- the biggest things and the smallest things, which is about the common good.

And it's always about wanting to defend the truth, which he would do, and defend against enemies. But it was always with a forgiving, wanting to -- so I've got a chapter in the book called "Surprising our Enemies." I think enemies are both real and imagined, but when they're real -- and they are real -- how do you deal with them? When the scriptures say, "If your enemy is hungry, feed them," and that sounds wonderful, it's like pouring heaping coals on their heads. What does that mean? It means sometimes you can surprise your enemies, not by wars of occupation, but by things that work much better to turn things around.

And he was always inviting, inviting, but always being clear what it meant to be a Narnian. And I love that story at the end, in one of the books, where the kids have saved a prince from a wicked queen, and she comes back and she puts her potions in the fireplace, and she's got them all thinking the wrong things again -- there isn't a lion, there isn't Narnia. And Puddleglum, who is a not-charismatic figure, was leading kids, he's goes over, he walks over there, and he steps on the potions with his bare feet, and he hurts his foot in the fire, and he says to her, he says, "My queen, you may be right. There may not be an Aslan or a Narnia. But if all we have is this world that you rule and control, if that's all we have, it's pretty sad. So, whether there is an Aslan or not, I'm going to believe in him. And whether there's a Narnia or not, I'm going to live like a Narnian," you know?

And so I felt that Aslan really inspired the whole book, the more I reflected on what it meant to serve the common book. So that's all there in the book.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. I loved that line, too.

I'm going to ask you a couple of religious, sort of -- “theological" sounds too fancy, but a couple of religious questions and a few policy questions. I do -- my

loyalty to this great place requires me to tell you that Brookings is in the book, and I'm going to get to that.

But, you have a great discussion of the kind of Jesus people believe in. You write, "The kind of Jesus we believe in will determine the kind of Christianity we practice." And you go on to write, "Is Jesus just the personal savior of the conservative churches, or the historical teacher of the liberal churches? Or is he the living teacher who walks among us..." -- Aslan again -- "...to save our lives and the world?"

And you have an interesting critique, in the sense of both the liberal and the conservative churches, even though many of your policy proposals line up more closely with the liberal churches.

Could you talk about the kind of Jesus we believe in? Because I think that is a very trenchant observation, and it's absolutely true, in my experience, in conversations with genuinely religious people of very different political views.

MR. WALLIS: This will come up in the seminaries that we're going to, more than at Brookings, but there's going to be some controversy about some of the things in the book, because I talk about the "gospel of the kingdom," versus what I'm calling the "atonement-only gospel," where salvation is a ticket to heaven, and that's really about the end of it.

And who we think Jesus is, and why he came -- there's a chapter on why he came -- will determine the kind of Christians we're going to end up being.

And so I think the conservative -- I grew up in the evangelical conservative world, and Jesus was, you know, our savior, who saved us from sin and from hell, and had us on the road to heaven, but he was very remote. And we didn't really think of him as a teacher, a teacher, because that sounded like the liberals who think he's a teacher. And so you have a remote savior, but who really isn't a teacher

who's walking alongside, like Aslan, trying to figure out what this gospel means for what you're facing today -- and tomorrow, and the next day. So that wasn't there -- savior, but no teacher.

But when I got to know the liberal churches -- and I know them well, and they're part of our constituency, and I love, often, their ethics about following Jesus. But if Jesus is just -- I've got a whole bookshelf of everything that Dr. King ever wrote, and I've got all the sermons, and I've listened to them all. I've got a whole Gandhi shelf.

But Jesus, for me, isn't just another shelf, like Gandhi and King -- flawed human beings. But, to me, Easter is important to me. And for me, the teacher is a living teacher, not just a dead person with good books to read about. And so the idea of a living teacher, like Aslan, who walks alongside, is your teacher, but is a living teacher, is very important to me.

And I had a debate with some deal friends, liberal theologians, and they asked me one day, Jim, we love your politics, we really do, but you actually believe in the resurrection, don't you? And I said, yeah, I do. "Well, for us, it's just kind of metaphorical." And I know this debate theologically, but I just said to them, let me just ask you this: In the heart of apartheid, in the heat of oppression, do you think a metaphorical resurrection would have been enough for Desmond Tutu? Because it wouldn't have been enough for me.

And so, to me, what it means to be, to follow a living teacher, is really -- that's how I see Jesus. So, in the Bible thing my kids are watching on Sunday nights -- they sent me the clips for that before and wanted me to make some comments, which I did -- and the one I saw was, you see, now Jesus is -- he goes out in the water, and he gets in a boat with Peter, and they throw the nets out, and he gets fish, and Peter says, "How'd you do that?" -- you know. And Jesus didn't answer, he said, "I want you to join

me and become a fisher of men." And Peter asks a great question, he says, "What are we going to do?" Well, that's a great question. What are we going to do?

And I love what the Jesus answer was. He says, "Change the world." He didn't say, "We're going to save a few people from their sins, and judge everybody else." He said, "Change the world."

So, the two people that did that series, Mark and Roma, came to visit in Washington one day, and we had this conversation. And they said, "Did we get that part right? Because it wasn't really in the scriptures that he said those words. But the more we read about this, the more it seemed like he was saying we're going to change the world -- right?" I said, "You got it right." You know, and then we went through Matthew 4, 5, and 6, this long study about how that's what -- this is a new order, breaking into the world, going to change the world and us with it. That's how I see it.

So, that's a theological -- and I got in last night, E.J., with a dear friend of mine who's more on the other side theologically, and we ended up closing the place down, over a glass of wine, about who Jesus was, and what that meant.

So, and then, on the interfaith side, I told the story about how we were having an action at the capitol once on the budget, believe it or not -- the budget was an issue before this time -- and a rabbi friend of mine said, "Can I join you?" I said, "Sure." And so I said, you can read the text, because we're doing Isaiah, so you have the text. We all got arrested and put in jail. And the rabbi, and Tony Campolo, the Baptist preacher, are having a discussing in jail about Christology -- what is Christ, who was Jesus. And they're having a really good discussion, you know. They don't agree.

And I thought, this is what I mean by interfaith collaboration. You get arrested together and discuss theology in jail. (Laughter)

MR. DIONNE: Yes, the headline on the event so far is, "Preacher Proposes Mass Civil Disobedience as the Key to Salvation."

I want to get to the Brookings part, but it's really from your -- early on in the book you talk about how both liberals and conservatives are needed for the common good, and you talk about the great conservative lesson being personal responsibility, and the great liberal lesson being social responsibility.

And later on in the book you talk about family. And we are debating gay marriage right now. And the line that stuck with me is from a very committed Christian friend of mine who said recently -- I think he's been saying this for a long time -- he said our problem isn't that gays and lesbians want to get married; it's that gays and lesbians are the only people who want to get married.

And his point -- he was exaggerating for a purpose, but what he was talking about is that the breakdown of the family, the rise in the number of couples who don't necessarily form permanent unions, is a real social problem. And this, by the way, is where the Brookings research came in, just to quote: "Researchers at the Brookings Institution agree. Their analysis shows that if we had the marriage rate we had in 1970, the poverty rate would fall by more than 25 percent."

And it's always struck me that this whole conversation about marriage and family is very unsatisfactory in our society, because liberals correctly want us to be open and tolerant -- and I personally support gay and lesbian marriage, partly, I think, on conservative grounds, which is if you want to promote fidelity and commitment why would you deny it to our friends, brothers and sisters, who are gay?

But, we are so -- but liberals are often so afraid of being judgmental that they don't want to talk about family breakdown at all.

MR. WALLIS: Right.

MR. DIONNE: Conservatives, on the other hand, worry about family breakdown, but don't want to talk about economic and social forces that are contributing to family breakdown.

And I guess I ask this question partly because I hope you'll be talking a lot about this, because I think we do need a better conversation on this subject in the country. But I wonder if you could elaborate on that part of the book?

MR. WALLIS: Well, this is really at the heart of this all, for me, because the common good really will challenge both sides of the political order on things like this. For example, the best conservative idea is personal responsibility. Conservatism has been co-opted by corporatism, and militarism, and all that. But personal responsibility is clear.

I've lived in poor neighborhoods most of my life, and I want to tell you, I don't see most people getting out of poverty -- and I've seen a lot of that -- without personal responsibility. That's key, clear, conservative idea.

The best liberal idea is social responsibility. It's not just enough to talk about individual efforts, and most people I know who escape poverty have needed some social responsibility, some assistance, some support, to make that possible.

So, why are these two traditions literally at war -- literally at war with each other -- and not trying to understand what each has to learn from each other?

So, apply it to this issue -- we had some meetings at Brookings, here. I was part of them. And it was interesting how Brookings, and other, conservative, think-tanks, had very similar data about how in the poverty line, people who are below the poverty line, only 7 percent of those people below the poverty line are married -- 7 percent. So the other day I was asked by a reporter, what are the things that combat

poverty? And I surprised the reporter by saying, well, marriage is an anti-poverty measure.

Now, the conservatives want to set up dating services in the ghetto, is their answer to that. And they don't understand, incarceration of men of color in urban neighborhoods is a huge part of why you've got family breakdown. Socioeconomic -- wages are static, and going down and down and down. There are socioeconomic reasons -- but we are losing marriage.

So, I want to say, I want to say there could be some common ground out of the gay-marriage conversation which would say something like this: Number one, this is changing very quickly, very fast -- this issue in this country, very fast. Number two, it's happening because it's person-to-person, family-to-family, relationship-to-relationship. Three, young people are leading the way on this. My staff, younger staff, are leading the way on this, more than some of us have, frankly. Four, it's a civic decision -- regardless of what you think theologically, this is a civic decision about whether people have equal protection under the law or not. And I was on Stephanopoulos with Calvin Butts on Sunday. Calvin has a traditional view about the Bible, but he says, "For a civil decision, I've got to support this, because this is about civil rights, and not just my theology."

But here's the final point I want to make -- I think we could find some common ground, perhaps, if liberals and conservatives came together around this: just saying, "We are losing..." -- and we are -- "...losing marriage in this society." We are losing marriage, particularly among low-income people, but also across the board. That is, I think, a serious problem.

How do we re-covenant, re-commit, renew, restore, re-weave the bonds of marriage in this society, which is central to the common good, and to parenting, and all

the rest? And then how do we make sure same-sex couples are included in the benefits of that re-weaving, re-covenanting, renewing marriage?

I think that could bring us closer. So we're not just arguing about marriage equality, which is an important discussion, but we're saying let's recommit to marriage, and then how to be inclusive in that commitment. That could be some common ground that might move us beyond just for and against marriage equality. I would hope it could.

MR. DIONNE: There were a bunch of things -- I will just put on the table and not ask about now, because I want to open it up very shortly.

But there is, actually, a lot of policy in this book. And I was struck, for example, by how you spoke of what religious groups, in alliance with others, can do to encourage global economic justice -- how do you have supply chains that involve people getting paid decently and treated decently at work in a global economy? Which I think is a very important thing.

You do talk about how campaigns work. There is -- Jim talks about the "Covenant for Civility" that a group of conservative -- more conservative, more progressive religious leaders agreed to.

But I want to talk about one issue that is divisive, and it's within the religious community as well as the broader community, and one way to put it is a division over what government's role is. But another way is, when you talk about -- you have a little section in your chapter called "Making Things Right," under the headline, "Afraid of Social Justice." And you should all know that Glenn Beck and Jim had a rather intensive to-do -- Jim didn't pick the fight, Glenn Beck did -- about the idea of social justice.

But what you do -- and I think this is a very important argument within, you know, our religious traditions, which is a distinction between charity and justice.

MR. WALLIS: Right.

MR. DIONNE: And they are not opposed to each other -- at least, I don't see how they can be opposed to each other -- and yet the emphasis you put on one or the other can make an enormous difference as to how you, what kinds of public policies you pursue.

Could you talk about that a little bit?

MR. WALLIS: Being on Glenn Beck's blackboard for several months is quite an experience. Joy would --

MR. DIONNE: Blackboard and black list, you know.

MR. WALLIS: Joy never heard of Glenn Beck -- my wife -- but she decided to tape him when she heard he was coming after me all the time. So she would call me upstairs, "You won't believe what he just said." So I got to hear all the things that Glenn Beck said.

But there's a chapter in the book called "Making Things Right." When you look at the language, the Biblical language for justice -- Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament -- it's about -- that's the framework, "making things right." In other words, you can respond to an injustice with compassion and care and love, but justice is not about just responding with compassion. It's about how do you make this right?

So, trafficking, there are more women and children in modern slavery now than when William Wilberforce freed the slaves 200 years ago in Britain -- more now. Bit issue for young believers.

And, now, you can keep rescuing women and children from brothels all over the world, which many are doing -- it's amazing work -- and putting them together in micro-enterprise, all kind of stuff. But if you don't deal with the causes of the slavery, you're going to just be dealing with victims of the problem.

And so I go through a whole chapter here of what does it mean to move to what will make this right? Whatever it takes to make this right, whatever the issue is, that's what justice requires. So it's not -- compassion or charity is often the open door, it's the way into something. It's, you know, Tim King in the back of the room, when he was a college student, saw these -- he's a home-schooled kid from New Hampshire -- he saw homeless people in Chicago, and he went down to just sort of stay with them and sleep with them to find out what made them homeless. Well, you can have a -- you can bring better sandwiches, and you could bring better food, but why were people homeless?

So, what does it mean to make things right? And I think that's the right question.

If you care about something, you can't care enough about education just to tutor kids -- and I've done all that -- unless you're saying, what's wrong with an educational system where schools in most neighborhoods I've lived in shouldn't be called "schools," they should be called "prisons," because they're imprisoning young kids of color in poverty for the rest of their lives. How do you change that, and not just tutor the kids? How do you deal with homelessness? What's behind that? How do you deal with, you know -- a pastor told me, "I'm worried about this 'dependence' thing." I said, "What do you mean?" Food stamps, he said. Oh, okay. Okay. "Did you know that most of the people who get food stamps have kids, most have a full-time worker in the house, and most do it for a short time?" "Really? You should get that out," he said. You know?

So, how do you deal -- and I want to say, I want to say, the Circle of Protection, which I'm a part of, with the Catholic bishops, and National Association of Evangelicals, the Salvation Army, we have fought to prevent the radical cutting of programs for low-income people. But we said in our last letter, it's not enough to protect a safety-net. As much as I believe in that, and have fought for that -- and so far, $2

trillion have been cut, and so far we've been able to keep any major cuts from happening for low-income people. But safety-nets do not overcome poverty. They, at best, keep you from falling further into poverty. And Democrats have got to be committed to more than safety-nets -- committed to making opportunity possible for people to overcome poverty.

So, doing what's right isn't just cutting spending, or protecting the safety-nets. It's moving beyond that to a serious commitment to overcome poverty. And that gets to structures.

And so I'll just say, on the global question, I was in a meeting here in town about the Congo, all these NGOs and CEOs, and I said -- and I was the lunch speaker, that means you're the religious speaker over lunch. You're supposed to inspire them while they're having their rubber chicken. And so they're all eating --

MR. DIONNE: It helps if they're drinking.

MR. WALLIS: And I said, "Please take out your cell phones. No, I mean it; take out your cell phones." So they took out -- I said this is your "significant other." This is who you spend most of your time with every day.

Now, we're talking about the Congo, and dirty minerals -- if you know the story -- that are being used, sold, and warlords are getting the money, and the money is being used to pillage innocent people, women and children, massacres. And I said, "I read the Good Samaritan story," which they had heard of. And I said, "Today, whoever helped to make this cell phone for you is your neighbor. How do you turn supply-chains into value-chains? How do we do that?" They all stopped eating, and we had a good conversation: how do you turn supply-chains?

That's "The Good Samaritan Global," is the chapter. How do you take this globally?

And until we talk about what's right -- and I talked to World Vision a few years ago. I said: you've got a great business plan. There is so much poverty, and so much guilt among the affluent, you could just make this work forever, just sponsoring kids, and taking care of kids. This will really work for you.

The other business plan is to talk about the reasons why so many people are so poor -- structures, institutions, habits. And here's a Oxfam fact for you I learned last week: Just the increase -- just the increase -- in the wealth of the .01 percent, the billionaires, just their increase in wealth last year could have lifted all the people the U.N. calls "living in extreme poverty" out of it. Just the increase in the wealth of those people. Now, that's a matter of Biblical proportions -- you know?

So, I think, to talk about not charity-versus-justice, like Glenn Beck was doing, but to say, what does it mean to make something right? Find what you care about, what breaks your heart, and then let's make it right.

MR. DIONNE: I'm going to steal a line from Jim, actually, and then go to the audience.

Jim often talks about the person who was standing next to the river and saw somebody drowning, and you would properly go out and rescue the drowning person. And then someone else is drowning, and you'd go out again. And you keep doing this, and finally you ask yourself, maybe I should go up the river and see who is throwing all these people into the water. And I think that's --

MR. WALLIS: And the way that Republicans and Democrats have handled that, there's a guy drowning out in the Potomac --

MR. DIONNE: Oh, I like that.

MR. DIONNE: -- he's 100 feet out there. And the Republicans rush down to the river, and they throw him 50 feet of rope. He's 100 feet out there. And they say, "The rest is up to you."

MR. DIONNE: This is my joke, actually. We steal from each other.

MR. WALLIS: "The rest is up to you."

Then Democrats see the -- they rush down, and the guy's going down now, 100 feet out. And they throw him 200 feet of rope, and then let go of their end." (Laughter)

MR. DIONNE: I love that story.

I have so many friends here, already, so I do want to welcome my -- I'll go right to this lady on the left.

I do want to welcome my friend, Father Tom Reese, back from being a brilliant Papal pundit, just back from Rome. I would appreciate a Jesuitical critique of this discussion at any point. Father Tom, please.

Yes -- oh, no, the lady behind you. I'm sorry -- just, right there is good, and then we'll pass it up.

MS. CHAMBERLAIN: Hello. I'm Rebecca Chamberlain, from the World Bank -- and from Michigan, actually.

MR. WALLIS: All right.

MS. CHAMBERLAIN: I work on conflict in fragile states at the World Bank, and I just returned from a work mission in Bosnia, a place I used to work on, that's really becoming increasingly ethnically divided.

So, I'm interested in this concept of the common good, and wonder if you see any aspects of this concept that can help us understand very ethically divided societies struggling to find a common good?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you.

MR. WALLIS: I'm glad you asked that. There's a whole chapter on this, called "How --" -- conflict is inevitable, okay? It's inevitable, between us, in our families, classes, nations -- it's inevitable.

So the whole argument, pacifism versus just-war, that is -- you know, I was in a debate once at Fuller Seminary in the "pacifist pulpit" versus the "just-war pulpit." And we're standing high above all these people, I said: This is the problem -- we've got to get out of the pulpits, onto the ground, and figure out what a lot of young people are seeing as really learning the art or the practice, or discipline of conflict-resolution.

The wars of occupation have failed to do what they purported to do. But if you believe in nonviolence, as I do, you've got to say nonviolence has to answer the questions that violence purports to answer, but in a different way. So, conflict-resolution is really becoming, for a lot of young people, an art, a practice, a vocation -- and they're all over the world. They're in situations of conflict, figuring out how to resolve those conflicts.

And there's a whole section of the book about how we always have people tell us who the "other" is, and for Communists, for years, and now it's Muslims. So I was with Daisy Khan last night in New York, wife of Imam Feisal -- you know, the Ground-Zero mosque, it was never a mosque. And we had a long talk about this.

And, you know, when the mosque was burned -- and my young staff, in the back, decided to talk with the people out there in the Midwest, and they put up these signs all around, "Love Your Muslim Neighbor." And when the Sikhs were killed, it was constant, a few weeks later, the same thing. And the subways in New York had these

awful anti-Muslim things. We put up these signs in the subway that just said, "Love Your Muslim Neighbor."

And in a situation of hate and fear, which was what was going on, just reminding people of things that we know to be true, like "love your Muslim neighbor" -- Pam Geller and debated, on television. And she's quite a piece of work. But, she couldn't really say she disagreed with the idea of loving your Muslim neighbor, even though she's doing hate and fear.

So, how do you put in these situations of conflict, the words and messages and practices that resolve conflicts? And the way you -- there's a whole section about how -- the way you resolve fundamentalism in religion is not by attacking it from the outside. You've got to beat it from the inside. You've got to undermine it from the inside. That's always the way fundamentalism is finally overcome -- from the inside, not attacked from the outside.

So, conflict-resolution is central to the common good. And it will be, I think, for a whole new generation, it's going to be a practice and a vocation that many young people are adopting for their life work.

MR. DIONNE: Father Andrew Greeley, in the '70s, wrote a great book -- it's one of my favorite book titles -- the book was called, *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* And I have always thought that that is the sort of the central question, or one of the central questions on this. Because difficulty in seeing that "they" are "like us," in more ways than we can realize is -- it's very hard to come to that. And sometimes we make it very difficult ourselves for someone else to come to that with us.

But thank you for the question.

The lady right there. I'll slowly move it up so Miriam doesn't have to run too far.

MS. SCHERER: Jacqueline Scherer, Oakland University.

How does "common good" come into our gun control controversy right now?

MR. DIONNE: Hmm -- bless you for that.

MR. WALLIS: Well, there's so much I want to say about that.

There were some friends of mine, young black pastors, who were in the White House trying to get the administration to make a commitment to this in the second term. And the first answer they got was, no, we're not going to do that. This was before Newtown.

Newtown happened, and it really changed a lot of things, including -- if you watched -- I was at the gun rollout, the gun-policy rollout with the President and Biden, and I hadn't seen President Obama be all-in on something the way he was in that speech, like he really was all-in on that, and it touched him in a very powerful way.

But, we've had 3,000 gun violence deaths since Newton, and 86 people every day, 8 kids every day, and most of them are in urban places that we have just forgotten about and not paid attention to, and they're not mass shootings. They're just individual acts of violence every single day.

And a lot of people in those places, for them the issue isn't Second Amendment, it's these two things: When -- children should bury their parents. When parents are burying their children, something has gone terribly wrong in the society. Clergy should be burying their older congregants. And when they're burying their young people, something has gone terribly wrong.

And for urban people, the issue isn't the Second Amendment, it's being at funerals where you're burying kids, when you come up to a dead body in the street -- you know? And we just haven't dealt with this.

We haven't dealt with this in communities that we've ignored for so long -- in this town, places I've lived that have changed a lot since, the first time that Hillary Clinton was at the White House, the First Lady, her first year, gun homicides, or youth homicides was the issue, so she had a bunch of us in the office and we talked. I met her for the first time. I went home, and there was yellow tape across the street from my house. While we were in the meeting another young man had gotten shot and killed, across the street. It never made *The Washington Post*, never on TV. No one cared -- you know?

So, if this doesn't change us -- now, it is, because 92 percent -- Joe Scarborough took a poll this morning, reported it, 92 percent of the American people are for background checks, and now they're in danger. That's an issue of democracy. Most Republicans are in favor of the common-sense gun regulations that are being proposed, and they're in more and more jeopardy. Democracy is being thwarted by gun runners, people who make most of their budget from gun manufacturers. That's whose fighting this. And I'm calling them "gunrunners," you know?

So, there's a democracy issue here that's got to be dealt with. And eventually, I think, it's going to force politicians to change their views.

MR. DIONNE: Can I just add -- I'm going to cheat for a second, because I wrote my column on this subject tomorrow, and I just want to report that a little town in Georgia called Nelson did something very revealing on Monday. They required everybody in the town to own a gun. Now, they're not going to enforce the law, but it does seem to me that that really lays out the choice, which is: We can seek a world in which we all have to be armed, and actually, our right not to be armed is infringed upon, or we can take steps so that we can have a peaceful society -- we'll never end all violence in society. I believe in what Niebuhr said, famously, "Original sin is the only

empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian church." So I don't believe we will ever get rid of all violence in the world, but we can try, collectively, to build a society in which we don't all have to be armed.

And I really do think that, fundamentally, that's the choice we face.

There was -- all right, why don't we do this. What time -- we go until 4:00, is that our schedule?

Let me -- can I take a trio of people -- or a trinity of people here? The two of you over there, including my friend at the end, and then this lady here -- why don't you each sort of chat, ask a question, and then I'll have Jim take them, like, three at a time or something, just to make sure we can get everyone in who wants to.

MS. ORCHOWSKI: Thanks. I'm Peggy Orchowski, I'm a reporter for the *Hispanic Outlook*, and I talk a lot about immigration. And we've had a couple of discussions.

MR. WALLIS: Yep.

MS. ORCHOWSKI: But you talk about fairness, government, the duty is to be fair. But what is "fair" about legalizing people who have defied immigration laws, while people who have tried to do it right, who are still in their countries, and they don't get jobs, and they don't get to have their kids in American schools, and all that.

What is fair about that? We're always looking at the illegal immigrant, the fairness to the illegal immigrant, but we're not ever looking at the fairness to the people who are trying to do it legally.

And the same way with the moral right to be here. And I think I've mentioned this to you before: If you make it a moral right to immigrate to the United States, then who doesn't have the moral right to come? Then we have open borders. So, I'd like you to address that.

MR. WALLIS: But we --

MR. DIONNE: Hold on to that answer so we can -- but that's a great question. You always press us on this, and it's very useful.

MR. BROWN: I'm Tom Brown, from Washington, D.C. And I hope that you will say a word about the disproportion, racial disproportion in our prisons.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you, sir -- and brevity is the soul of wit.

And the lady over here.

MS. JARVIS: Hi, I'm Julia Jarvis. And, Jim, I'm glad you're a little-league baseball coach, because I, as the pitcher for Bread for the World in 1988, I struck you out.

MR. WALLIS: I know. (Laughter) Why did you have to mention that?

MS. JARVIS: I'm sorry. I just want your kids to know about it.

MR. DIONNE: We'll send them a transcript.

MS. JARVIS: So, I wondered, your title "On God's Side," as I think of Thomas Merton on the downtown Louisville, Kentucky, having this enlightening experience of being filled with God's spirit, and loving everyone -- I wonder if God even has a side?

MR. DIONNE: Ooh -- these are good questions.

So, what's fair about -- on illegal immigration, about letting people stay who have come here against the law?

What about the -- is that -- that's a reasonably --

MS. ORCHOWSKI: Well, the fairness to the people who don't get to come.

MR. DIONNE: Right.

MS. ORCHOWSKI: Who are doing it right.

MR. DIONNE: Yes. Thank you.

The racial disproportion in prisons.

And, is God on any side?

MR. WALLIS: Well, we've had this conversation before. I'm not sure my answer will satisfy you, but I'll say what it is.

First of all, there are two signs up at the border in the South, there are two signs -- invisible, but they're there. One says, "No trespass," one says, "Help wanted." In between those signs, 11 million people, vulnerable people, have been trapped, most of them just seeking some economic survival for their families.

They all are in the category the Bible calls "the stranger." Whatever you think about policy, they are in the Biblical category of "the stranger," and what's converted so many evangelicals, because they're seeing now, Jesus says how you treat the stranger is how you treat me. And that's converting evangelicals.

Secondly, it's a Biblical conversion, it's a relational -- now, I'm in the White House for a meeting, and the White House is saying to these pastors, we only deport the cartels and the drug people. And a pastor, white, gray-haired, Orange County, Anglo pastor, says, No, you deported Jose, and now his son Joaquin has joined a gang." The senior White House person said, "Oh, no, no, no, we just deport -- " -- I said -- I know this senior person well -- I said, "Listen to the pastors." Now the "they" has become "us." Their families are part of our families. When you worship with people, you get to know them and understand their history, and why they came and were trapped.

Secondly, the proposals are all going to really try and be fair to those who are in line. They get -- they go first. All the proposals say those who are in line, they go first. It should be, will be fair to them.

But for those that have been here -- I know people, I've been with people who have been here for their whole lives, or for decades. They came on the back of their father or their mother, and they're now 40 years old, and they've been here forever, and they are part of this society.

And so I believe it's going to be a process, an earned process to citizenship that will take a long time. It won't be easy. It will not be amnesty. It will be very tough, a lot of roadblocks along the way. But I think that's -- I don't want a second-class group of workers in the country, it's just that want people to be able to (inaudible) long term.

Prisons -- the truth about a society is always best known, not at the top of the society, but at the bottom of it. And if you want to suggest that we are in a post-racial country now because we've elected a black President, or whatever, go to the criminal justice system. Racism is just so evident in every part of the criminal justice system, and that reflects the truth about a society.

Now, this may be another area where we can find common ground. I'm becoming -- one of the people I'm working with more and more on some of these things is somebody E.J. knows, who once came to me and said, "Jim, let's do something together that would shock politics. I'm a Catholic..." -- I said, "I know you are." He says, "And I'm against the death penalty." It's Richard Viguerie, and we have become -- we're working together on something we might do together to try to call for a moratorium on the death penalty, from conservatives -- some of whom are on the board of the National Rifle Association -- and liberals.

I mean, the criminal justice system is so wrong, and needs such radical change; this could bring us together across boundaries.

The third thing is, I don't know -- that's why I said, the title, it raises the right question, does God -- Lincoln said -- Lincoln -- I used to take, when I would tutor kids, I would take them down to the Lincoln Memorial, teaching them how to read, and I would sit there in front of the, you know, sort of the Second Inaugural, and we'd read it through, slowly, to get the words right. And they'd learn how to read by reading the Second Inaugural. And would love them saying, "With malice toward none," you know? And how we pray to the same god, and all our prayers weren't answered. I quote Lincoln in the book on that.

And, you know, Lincoln is saying we want God to be on our side. And we all claim that God agrees with us. And he says, "I want to know what it means to be on God's side."

So, that's probably a human-frail comment that probably doesn't get at the whole thing, but it flips the question. And it adds a kind of humility that we need to bring to this question.

Would you call on my rabbi in the back of the room, over there?

MR. DIONNE: Where is your -- oh, let's go -- yes, so we've -- I see some hands here. I have friends I want to get on that side, but let's go all the way back to our rabbi.

MR. SAPERSTEIN: Hi, I'm David Saperstein. Thank you for this, Jim.

I'm curious -- I'm sure you believe religion has important moral insights to offer on almost all of our vexing issues. And I'm sure that you believe that there are some issues that are the most urgent and important, and others that religion has important things to say about.

What are the issues that you think religion can actually make the most impact on by lifting up its moral values, its concept of the common good? And what are the criteria that lead you to that conclusion?

MR. DIONNE: See, whenever David asks such a great question, I know he has a great answer. But I can't ask him back.

Jim?

MR. WALLIS: Well, David is my rabbi; I want to say that out loud. And we've worked together on so many issues about the common good.

I do think, in the immigration battle going on right now -- I mean, at RAC, Martin King and civil rights leaders met in your conference room many years ago, and that was a place where strategy got done.

I don't think I've seen the churches have such a potentially game-changing political role on an issue like immigration since the civil rights movement. We've had impact, good and bad, on lots of things -- some bad, some good. But I haven't seen this kind of game-changing role that I'm seeing now from the faith community on this issue of immigration. And literally 11 million vulnerable people, lives will be changed if this can pass by August recess.

So, right now, I think that's the top thing.

You and I care a lot about the issue of guns. We've both spoken out on that -- RAC and Sojourners are very committed to that. That's going to be a long haul, a heavy lift. But I think, you know -- again, I think pastors and parents are going to be the ones who change -- the clergy and the parents are going to be the ones, as clergy, as parents, saying we can't accept this anymore -- 86 people today, 8 kids. I think that issue's going to be key.

And I think, even on this sequester budget, it's really: What is the future of our fiscal soul in this country? That's what this is about. Are we going to find a path to financial sustainability that is respectful of the principle that you and I try to lift all the time in this town, of the first question -- always -- is how are the most vulnerable being treated? That's always our question.

And a reporter asked me the other day, well, don't you like Democrats better than Republicans? I said, you know, I find, with the Democrats in the White House, and in Congress, and in the Senate, that Democrats and Republicans have to be reminded again and again that for us in the faith community, the most important question is how the poor and the vulnerable are being treated. That's always the question.

So that's why you were out there on Darfur. And there was a picnic on the lawn, with Jewish families and evangelical families, around Darfur, because of what was happening. And Darfur was not a priority for this government. The Congo has not been a priority, you know. Why? Because there's no oil there. I mean, you know, why does all this stuff happen when there's no strategic interest there?

So our job is to always raise that question.

So, right now, I think it's applied -- immigration is critical. I think how we end up on this budget battle is critical, you know? We cannot reduce the deficit by increasing poverty at the same time. That is simply immoral, and we have to say that, you know. So those are the questions right now, and gun violence, I think, is next.

MR. DIONNE: Somewhere in Jim's book there is a list -- and I'm bastardizing the list -- but it does seem to me that wherever justice, charity, the equal dignity of all human beings, and reducing violence are implicated, the religion -- our religious traditions probably have more to say.

They probably have less to say over, say, the funding formula in the Highway Bill -- although there may be justice involved in there.

Let's see -- I want to go one over here, and then we'll do the three over here. That lady in the back, and then let's get you all in.

Let's go to Bob Abernathy next. Right -- Bob, you can identify yourself. The lady, first, and then you.

Go ahead.

MS. FRIEDMAN: Hi, my name is Ann Friedman. And to take your conversation back to the District of Columbia -- I work with a group here called Good Faith Communities Coalition, and we are trying to bring justice conversations our of faith communities here in the District, and relative to the budget in the District, particularly around affordable housing and homelessness.

What we have found is, as we have talked to new congregations, there is a great belief in charity and service, and feeling good about that. When you get to justice, working to change institutions, then the whole fear of being confrontational comes about, and the language of confrontation is not comfortable in faith communities, and they will back off to their charity and service as sufficient unto what is to be done.

In the District of Columbia, we had, in the paper Mr. Dionne writes for, an outrage over 660 children in a homeless shelter here in the District. The number is now up over 900, and still we can't get that message out that this is morally unacceptable. So, how do we increase the language we bring to faith communities that this search for justice is a language we all need to embrace?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you.

Bob?

MR. ABERNATHY: Yes, I'm Bob Abernathy, with Religion and Ethics News Weekly.

Jim --

MR. DIONNE: A TV show everyone here should watch, by the way.

MR. ABERNATHY: Especially when E.J. and Jim are on.

Jim, this may sound like a stupid question, and perhaps it is: What's your definition of the "common good?"

MR. DIONNE: That's a great question. This book actually has a number.

Let me bring in one more voice. This gentleman on the aisle.

MR. CHECCO: Thank you. Larry Checco, Checco Communications. What happens to the common good when we, as the people, no longer have trust or faith in the institutions we were taught to respect -- from our government, financial institutions, even some non-profits, and our religious institutions?

MR. DIONNE: That's a fastball right down the middle of the plate, having read this book.

Thank you, sir.

Yeah, let's take all of those. And try to give Bob a good definition "of the common good."

MR. WALLIS: Well, if David Beckmann was here, Bread for the World has done some good -- this justice-charity question. David would tell us that if you take all the soup kitchens, and all the food pantries, and all the feeding programs of every church, synagogue and mosque in the country, those wonderful programs basically deal with 6 percent of the nutritional needs of the country-6 percent.

So, just small cuts in food stamps, while we're subsidizing agribusiness, for example, could devastate all of that work.

And I think, getting back to this issue of what makes something right, what I find -- the reason Glenn Beck, the reason it was a funny -- well, funny, it wasn't at the time -- the reason he came after us was, he said -- he said , "If your church even has the phrase "social justice" on their website, or if you hear ea sermon where the preacher uses that language, run from that church, leave it as fast as you can." Because he was terribly threatened by the idea of justice.

Because while charity is, for many, the opening of a door to understand what's wrong in the world, charity becomes the way to sort of quietly sort of take care of some of the symptoms, or some of the consequences of whole systems and structures that are fundamentally unjust. And you don't hear the Biblical prophets just saying "take care of poor people." The word "oppression" was Biblical long before Karl Marx put pen to paper.

Look at what the prophets say about why there is injustice. And it's always about, "You, oh, King." It's about -- the prophets talk about -- they talk at employers, rulers, kings, people in charge. They talk -- the subjects they talk about are widows, orphans, workers, strangers, those who are on the bottom. And the topics they deal with are land, labor, and capital. Read it -- you know? "You, oh, King..." -- merchant, employer. Widows, orphans, workers. Land, labor, and capital. It's a justice conversation.

So the answer to the church's doing this is, frankly, Bible study -- Bible study. And the reason this program about the stranger is working so well, is you've got evangelicals and their churches doing Bible study. Ninety-two times, this word -- this "stranger," what we should do about strangers, is the Bible -- 92 passages where that is

talked about. And when you go through that, you see it's not just sort of providing a soup kitchen for undocumented people. It's about how we treat the stranger.

So I think the answer here is getting back to our roots, and our Bible study.

"Common good" -- you know, Bob, I talk about how the multiple traditions -- I talk about Catholic social teaching, about Solidarity, all of that is in the book. But also Ubuntu, which is the African -- Desmond Tutu talks about, you know, that we are really not -- that we are not just ones, we are together. And I can't really go forward without going forward with you. We find our identity in each other -- the African notion of that. The black church has talked about this.

It means -- and this is where the Washington lawyers are in the Bible. It's always they want to limit the definition of "neighbor." The foundation for us is loving your neighbor as yourself. But then all of the political push-back is, "Who is my neighbor?" That's a question that he was asked by this Washington lawyer, Jesus was asked. And it was -- when "my neighbor" is defined too narrowly, "people like me," "our group," that's when we're in trouble.

So all it is, really, is continue to expand the notion, the definition of "neighbor," what that means. And then how do I love my neighbor as myself? To me, that's the spiritual foundation of the common good.

The last thing is our institutions. Well, the subtitle is, "what religion forgets, and politics hasn't learned."

Our institutions are not trusted. It's amazing, though -- we could get into this -- it's amazing, though, how just the opening weeks of Pope Francis, just a few simple things, like Maundy Thursday, going to a juvenile prison, and including women in the rite, and washing the feet of prisoners, including Muslims -- little things like that begin to restore trust that was lost for so long.

So, when people of faith do two things -- when we say and do what our faith tells us to say and do, two things happen: People are surprised, and then they're attracted. They're surprised, and then they're attracted.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you.

Let's let this lady in, because you've been very patient. And then we're close to our time.

I also, since Pope Francis was mentioned, at the rampant clericalism, I want to invite Father Tom -- if he wants to join.

But, ma'am, thank you.

MS. WHITE: I'm Ruth Alice White --

MR. DIONNE: Hold on, I think -- let's turn it on.

Thank you, ma'am.

MS. WHITE: I'm Ruth Alice White.

You mentioned "gunrunners." Actually, in talking about the budget, we talk about pennies for the poor, but millions, billions, for the Defense Department.

And we have been the armament dealers for the world in many ways. And, also, pushing corporate welfare for our own defense industry to a great degree. It makes me impatient when I hear about not having money for the poor and the needy when we waste so much in that respect.

How do we get churches -- other than the so-called "peace churches" -- on this issue?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you.

Father Tom, do you want to say something? Or – no? Is that a yes or a no. Okay.

Why don't we take -- oh, just, by the way, before I go to Jim, on Bob Abernathy's question, Jim has some very good definitions of "the common good" in the book.

One I like, he is quoting the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales -- so, this is no doubt in deference to Joy, although she's an Anglican. And I just kind of like this definition of the common good: "'Common good' is the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and leave a fully genuinely human life. All are responsible for all, collectively, at the level of society or nation, not only as individuals."

I think that's a very instructive definition of the common good.

MR. WALLIS: That phrase, "all are responsible for all," really says it well. Yeah. And who the "all" is, is always the ongoing question.

Well, on this question -- you know, with a general just leaving the presidency, a general, Dwight Eisenhower, who coined this phrase "military industrial complex." He was talking about the business of war. The business of war.

That's what we're facing now. I won't call this "defense." This is the business of war. And the business of war is not the same thing as national security.

Now, you talk about where Democrats and Republicans are alike, is neither is willing to go to the place where so much of the money is and won't be dealt with. And if you talk about waste and corruption and abuse of government money, there's no place -- everyone knows -- where that's going on more than in the Defense Department.

So, it's simply unconscionable to not talk about where that money goes.

Now, we can talk about, you know, what national security requires, and so on. But we're talking about weapons that have no usefulness at all. I want to spend -- if you've been looking at the coverage of this, veterans are waiting now up to two or three years for disability payments. Veterans. We should spend so much more on our veterans than we do.

But these weapons systems that are utterly useless, and not even applicable to our security needs, are just the business of war. And until we have that conversation, we'll not really deal with the budget issues in a moral way at all.

I found this conversation very, very helpful. And let me just say, this is for us at Sojourners, a serious effort to get a common-good conversation going.

And so -- my sons are teaching me stuff -- okay? Get out your cell phones. Here we go. Seriously, come on; get out your cell phones.

MR. DIONNE: This is like committing yourself through the cell phone.

MR. WALLIS: This is -- it won't cost you a thing. But we want to hear from you, and provide resources for this common-good conversation by texting -- just text "good," G-O-O-D. It's easy to remember and spell -- "good877877."

I hate to walk out of discussions like this and feel like we're not in touch anymore. Good877877 -- and we want to be in touch with people about how to have this conversation in your workplaces, your congregations, your schools, how to have this conversation. We'll provide you a free study guide for the book, other free resources.

But just, we've got to have a conversation, and that's what this is all about.

So, "good877877." And I want to thank --

MR. DIONNE: And an operator is there waiting for your call. (Laughter)

I want to say two quick things: One is, Jim will be in the back, signing this great book. And second, there is a great old joke about the problems of the modern media, where a reporter is sent to cover Moses getting the 10 commandments. He gets on the phone which his producer, and the producer says, "Sorry, we only have a minute-30, what are the three most important commandments?"

Well, at the end of Jim's book, he has 10 personal decisions for the common good. I don't have time to read all 10, but I want to read 3 of them, because I think they summarize what he's up to very well.

One of them goes, "Make choices by distinguishing between wants and needs. Choose what is enough, rather than what it is possible to get. Replace appetites with values. Teach your children the same. And model those values for all who are in your life.

Another one: "Ask yourself what in the world today breaks your heart and offends your sense of justice. Decide to help change that, and join with others who are committed to transforming that injustice.

And, lastly: "If you are person of faith, focus not just on what you believe, but on how you act on those beliefs. If you love God, ask God how to love your neighbor.

Thank you very much, Jim.

MR. WALLIS: Thank you, E.J. Thank you all. (Applause)

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