

“Support Public Service” is a BIG Topic – it certainly includes public servants like First Responders, City Council members, or US Senators. But as was shown in the video, it can also include “regular” folks who are willing to serve their community in a variety of ways. In a moment we’ll be able to hear more about that from our featured speaker, Lexi Steverding.

As the week has unfolded, I’ve found myself using this sermon as a bridge between last week’s featured topic – *Teach Civics* – and our keynoter, history teacher Matt Foulds, and today’s topic – *Support Public Servants*.

The moments that inspired me this week happened through the voices of two well-known women.

The first came when reading the digest for August 14 by historian Heather Cox Richardson, who noted that on that date in 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law. While he had already put in place new measures to regulate business and banking and had provided temporary work relief to combat the Depression, this law permanently changed the nature of the American government.

<https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/august-13-2025-e78>

Richardson writes,

The Social Security Act established a federal system of  
old-age benefits;  
unemployment insurance;

aid to homeless, dependent, and neglected children;  
funds to promote maternal and child welfare;  
and public health services.

It was a sweeping reworking of the relationship between the government and its citizens, using the power of taxation to pool funds to provide a basic social safety net.

The driving force behind the law was FDR's secretary of labor, **Frances Perkins**. She was the first woman to hold a position in the U.S. Cabinet and still holds the record for having the longest tenure in that job: she served from 1933 to 1945.

Perkins brought to the position a vision of government very different from that of (those) who had run it in the 1920s. While men like President Herbert Hoover had embraced the idea of a "rugged individualism" in which men provided for their families on their own, Perkins recognized that the vision of a hardworking man supporting his wife and children was more myth than reality: her own husband suffered from bipolar disorder, making her the family's primary support. She understood that Americans had always supported each other.

In college, at Mount Holyoke, Perkins majored in chemistry and physics, but after a professor required students to tour a factory to observe working conditions, **Perkins became committed to improving the lives of those trapped in industrial jobs**. After college, Perkins became a social worker and, in 1910, earned a masters degree in economics and sociology from

Columbia University. She became the head of the New York office of the National Consumers League, urging consumers to use their buying power to demand better conditions and wages for the workers who made the products they were buying.

... The overwhelming unemployment, hunger, and suffering during the Great Depression convinced Perkins that state governments alone could not adjust the conditions of the modern world to create a safe, supportive community for ordinary people. She came to believe that, as she said: “The people are what matter to government, and a government should aim to give all the people under its jurisdiction the best possible life.”

Perkins met FDR through (political) connections, and when he asked her to be his secretary of labor, she told him that she wanted the federal government to provide unemployment insurance, health insurance, and old-age insurance. She later recalled: “I remember he looked so startled, and he said, ‘Well, do you think it can be done?’”

Creating federal unemployment insurance became her primary concern. Congressmen had little interest in passing such legislation, claiming that unemployment insurance and federal aid to dependent families would undermine a man’s willingness to work. But Perkins recognized that the Depression had added pressure to the idea of social insurance by emphasizing the needs of older Americans. ...

...By the time the bill came to a vote, it was hugely popular. The vote was 371 to 33 in the House and 77 to 6 in the Senate.

When asked to describe the origins of the Social Security Act, Perkins mused that its roots came from the very beginnings of the nation. When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote "Democracy in America" in 1835, she noted, he thought Americans were uniquely "so generous, so kind, so charitably disposed." "Well, I don't know anything about the times in which De Tocqueville visited America," she said, but "I do know that at the time I came into the field of social work, these feelings were real."

...

Frances Perkins' story reminded me that those who make large change do so because they have a passion for a particular thing. And when they match that passion with compassion they are able to strengthen the most vulnerable. Perkins didn't begin by believing she would be the author of a federal Act. She looked around and saw where there were gaps in service for those who needed it most, and she stepped into that space. It is something any of us can do – and many of us have.

The second bit of inspiration for me this week was heard on the podcast former First Lady Michelle Obama hosts with her brother, Craig Robinson, called "IMO," from the texting shorthand "In My Opinion." In their first live podcast together, recorded this past March at the *South By Southwest* Conference and Festivals, they were joined by Dr. Laurie Santos, psychology professor at Yale University

and host of *The Happiness Lab*, to answer questions about finding hope in hard times. I've pulled part of their dialogue from the transcript.

([https://youtu.be/zPqLAp673Xc?si=6eQNTI\\_jh7Z193W8](https://youtu.be/zPqLAp673Xc?si=6eQNTI_jh7Z193W8))

Dr. Santos:

What can we do to find hope when things are tough?

One is making sure you have the right definition of hope, because I think sometimes when we think of hope, we think of what psychologists might call optimism. We're just like, "everything's going to be fine." (But that may feel like we're emotionally fooling ourselves.) ... I mean, look at the news, ... look at anywhere (where it doesn't appear that things are) fine, right? And so I think it's important to call it the way it is. It's not fine. But (often) hope (comes alive when) things are not fine. ....

But there is a path. What does that path do? It gives you agency. It gives you a sense that something can be done, and probably I can be a small part of what needs to get done. And that small part is key, because when we think we have to be the only one out there fixing everything, that also makes us feel a little overwhelmed and sad. But when you realize that you're a small action, you're checking in on someone; you're donating five bucks to a cause you care about; you're stepping up in any way to make things better - that actually matters.

And one of the things we know psychologically is that it also helps us feel a little bit more hopeful when we take action. Right? ...Psychologically, you start to feel like, "oh, we're even getting closer to a solution because I stepped up." Maybe other people step up. You also see good social evidence that you're not the only one. (*Gesture to the congregation*) You are in a whole room like this full of people who care.

Now all of a sudden, your beliefs start to change: **instead of being in that vicious cycle of hopelessness,... you can become part of a virtuous cycle of hopefulness.**

Michelle:

And that's the kind of thing that can also be socially contagious. And as somebody who has seen all kinds of power at work,...one of the things I remind people of is, yes, there is large power. You know, there are a handful people in the world who can do a few things that can impact so many. But the truth is, there is the small power that each of us (can) do something right in front of us. If we all do that, it outweighs anything that some big leader somewhere can do.

Just think about... our parents – did you know Marian and Fraser Robinson, didn't go to college?

You know, mother stayed at home. Father was a city worker.

And let me just stop and give a big shout out to city and federal workers, people who are the lifeblood of this country. Also, those jobs helped to create an entire middle class of people like our father's, our parents; and they do the lion's share of the work in this country. You know, if we were going to start asking who's doing what, I would, in my experience, (lift up) the folks who are working on the ground, and picking up our garbage and making sure that our ... schools run, and that our air is clean, and that our flights stay up in the air. That those people are the true heart and blood of this country. *Applause* (Then she concluded, **But, that power is what changes things.**)

Which brings us home to our point. The actions big and small, built on caring for others, are not only the heart and blood of the country, but they are also actions of faithful people, acting on “loving one another as Christ Jesus has loved you,” as we heard in John’s gospel. And, yes, there are many people who fulfill Jesus’ proclamation that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” It is the ultimate sacrifice that many of our loved ones have offered. (It is the terrible reality for many in Oksana’s Beloved Community in Ukraine.)

Not all of us will be called upon to lay down our lives for others – for the Common Good. But that does not mean that we cannot make a difference; especially if we express our hope finding places to use our gifts and passions

We’ve already heard from several impactful women, let’s now turn to another. Lexi Steverding, grew up in Lyndhurst Community Presbyterian Church, and is still a member of Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church. She is an incredibly gifted artist, and with Joe Bloom, is responsible for the logo of our church.

Lexi is heavily involved in her community of Columbus. Currently she is a Sr. coordinator working at an organization called Besa, a sitting board member of Treats 4 the Streets, a 2025 cohort member at the Columbus YWCA Leadership for Social Change Program, and a member of the Asian American and Pacific Islander leadership group, OPAWL. Lexi’s joy for life is contagious, and I am grateful that she made the trek from Columbus to join us this morning.