



Life Together

Philippians 2:12-18

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Senior Minister

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Anniversary Sunday

CONNECT  GROW  SERVE

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

-Philippians 2:12-18

Herman Ostery, a farmer in Nebraska, had a problem with his barn. It is a perfectly good barn, except that it needed to be moved 110 feet to make room for a new road that is coming through. (Not exactly a BQE Highway to Hell—but we know a little of how he feels.) Herman made plans to tear down his perfectly good barn and rebuild it 110 feet away. He dreaded all that work.

Some of his neighbors heard about it and came up with an unusual idea: “Herman, what if all of us

picked up your barn together and carried it where you want it to be?”

Herman was dubious, but agreed to let them try. Several days later 328 friends and neighbors showed up. They used a hydraulic jack to lift the barn a little off the ground. Then 328 people picked up the barn, carried it 110 feet, and set it down without breaking it. They estimate that each person carried about fifty pounds.

When preachers hear a story like that one, the homiletical gears start shifting. This story has to illustrate something.

For ministers in the middle of stewardship campaigns the story illustrates how some in the church are not carrying their share of the load while others are straining under the burden of more than their share. Some preachers would offer the percentage of family units that give fifty percent of the church's offerings, the percentage that have not come within 110 feet of the barn, and how much faster the church would move if 328 of us gave ten percent more.

For preachers with counseling degrees the key to understanding the story is Herman's willingness to tear down his perfectly good barn—obviously symbolic of his inner child—in order to avoid asking for professional help. Some ministers would implore their congregations to look deep inside and ask, “How have I taken an emotional sledgehammer

to the barn that is my own soul, instead of asking for the counseling I so desperately need?”

For Pentecostal preachers the central element in the story is the hydraulic jack that clearly represents the Holy Ghost. Spirit-filled preachers will point out that we cannot move the church on our own, but with the uplifting of the Spirit, we start down the road toward God.

Less creative preachers—like your preacher—will not make any points about stewardship, psychology, or the Trinity. Unimaginative ministers will simply say that if we are going to be the church we need each other. We are in this together.

In matters of faith, Americans tend to think we are on our own. The Protestant idea of the priesthood of the believers, with an “s” on the end of believers, is that we are priests to one another, taking care of each other.

The misleading version of the priesthood of the believer leaves off the “s”, and claims that we do not need a priest or anyone else. All I need to do is apply myself and I will be on my way. Just me and God.

But it is not true. We need help. We need help to give, because by ourselves giving does not feel like it pays off. We need help to be kind, because on our own we get frustrated and give up on kindness. We need help to love, because love seems like a

luxury in the middle of a hard day. Our good intentions do not last when we are by ourselves.

When Paul writes to the church at Philippi, for just a phrase he sounds like a self-help guru, “Work out your own salvation,” but then he adds the kicker, “it is God who is at work in you, the energy is God’s energy. God is enabling you to do the good that brings God’s pleasure.”

Aeschylus said, “Whenever anyone makes an effort, God also lends a hand.”

We do not work for goodness in our own power. We work in the power of goodness. Spirituality is not an accomplishment, but the work of God’s love.

When Paul writes, “Work out your own salvation” the word “your” is not singular but plural. It is not God and me. It is God and God’s people.

You go to Hillis Hall and pour a cup of coffee that could remind you of our dependence on countless people—biologists creating better strands of coffee beans, sellers, underpaid planters, exploited harvesters, Juan Valdez carrying the coffee on burros, burlap bag makers, transporters, sellers who put the beans in the bag, inventors of coffee bean grinders, marketers, retailers selling the beans, stock clerks stamping prices on them, check-out clerks, and on and on.

How much more so for Plymouth Church? You and I would not be here were it not for two thousand years of Christians who kept telling a story that is

always one generation from disappearing. They told the story when it was illegal to tell it. They told the story at the cost of their lives.

We are dependent on the twenty-one men and women who gathered in 1847 to start a church and called Henry Ward Beecher as their first pastor. This congregation opposed slavery in ways that could have landed them in jail. We are dependent on people who built this church by breaking the law, who put the needs of others ahead of their own, and who valued God's opinion over everyone else's.

When we recognize, even cherish, our dependence on others we become the church. We are so pushed apart by pride and selfishness that we do not see how much we need each other. Paul tells the church to stop complaining. Stop dwelling on how you think you have been slighted. Stop ignoring, fearing or merely tolerating one another.

Our church is at its best when we move past pride and selfishness, when a complaining person becomes grateful, when a lonely person is welcomed, when a hurting person is brought back from despair, and when a selfish person is invited to care. Church happens in a warm handshake, a surprising smile, and the relinquishing of stubbornness.

The eighty-year-old makes a twenty mile journey every day to be with his wife in a nursing home. The trip takes about two hours on the bus,

but he does not mind. He is warm and outgoing and has struck up friendships with the bus driver and some of the other passengers. One evening the man is standing at the bus stop in a downpour when a Volkswagen pulls up. The driver calls out, "I've come to take you home. The bus has broken down and the driver, a friend of mine, phoned to ask me to go to the bus stop at the nursing home and see that you get home safely."

If we are the church, then we are the ones who need help, the ones who decide to help, and the ones sent to help.

Paul says the children of God shine like stars. Our church shines when any one of us acts with grace that owes anything to our life together. Plymouth shines when John Rodriguez mops Hillis Hall. Plymouth sparkles when Tom Bettridge hammers a nail in a Habitat for Humanity house. Plymouth shimmers when Sally Larsen arranges flowers with Bloom Again Brooklyn.

Plymouth flickers like a bright star on a cloudy night when Heather Gallivan fills a bag for Brooklyn Delivers. Plymouth twinkles when Julia Rassmann calms a three-year-old who two minutes later cannot remember why she was crying. Plymouth beams when Brooke Collins helps a seven-year-old in the Seraph Choir hit just the right note.

Plymouth shimmers when Erica Cooper hears the same question for the tenth time from the same

eighth grader and says, “That’s a great question.” Plymouth glimmers when Vernice Bryant-Akpan takes flowers to Steven Kann. Plymouth glistens when Elizabeth Snypes, working in the Underground Thrift Store, finds just the right shoes for a woman who has a job interview.

Plymouth glows when Carol Younger writes a devotion on following Christ and an electrician in Kentucky who reads it spends his day thinking about Jesus. Plymouth gleams when Fran Vasquez counseling a beleaguered husband, asks, “Have you tried this?” and a light goes on and for the first time in months he thinks, “That might work.” Plymouth dazzles when Meagan Scaduto sticks her head into a hospital room and asks, “How are you doing?”

Because God shines through us, Plymouth is a star on a dark night and a light in a gloomy world. We are here because God calls us to shine. We are here because God invites us to gather at this table, as a family.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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