

The Purpose of Unity: God Can Finish What God Has Begun

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11 (RSV) *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ... ⁹And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

[Memory Verse: PHILIPPIANS 1:6 (NRSV) *I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

Interactive Intro: where have you seen God at work in this congregation? Is that work completed? [*God completes what God begins! But God's work is not yet finished! God isn't through with us yet!*]

The Vision of this Congregation is "to be a church that is passionately growing in Faith by serving and sharing Jesus Christ." Where do you see that happening? Have we completed the work indicated in our vision? [*God completes what God begins! But God's work is not yet finished! God isn't through with us yet!*]

The Missional Purpose discerned by this congregation is "to use our Spiritual Gifts to go wherever Christ leads, restoring relationships and inviting everyone into a healing, united fellowship of love." Where do you see that happening? Is that work completed? [*God completes what God begins! But God's work is not yet finished! God isn't through with us yet!*]

There once was a young minister whose first parish was a small church in a farming community in the Midwest. There was some resistance in that community to a woman minister, and she found a cool reception on her first Sunday.

"They'll warm up to me as they get to know me," she assured herself, and she set out Monday morning to begin calling and getting acquainted with the people. She approached the first farm house, where she was greeted with restrained courtesy.

In her most enthusiastic, bubbly voice, she began, "God has so richly blessed you on this farm. Every direction I look I see healthy cattle and green fields. It's such a beautiful place God has given you."

The farmer cleared his throat and said, "Well, preacher, you shoulda' seen this place when God had it by himself."

It's true: God completes what God begins; and God's work sets us up with gifts to use in completing our work as people called of God. God gives us all we need; but God doesn't do the work for us.

The text this morning from Paul speaks of two days: ⁵*(I am) thankful for your*

partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." There's a "first day" and a "day of completion," which he calls "the day of Jesus Christ."

The uncertainties and upheavals surrounding our own lives are a constant reminder that the day of completion has not yet come. We live in an expectant, yet unfulfilled time—a promise-not-yet-fulfilled; and there are two common responses:

The first is a kind of utopian expectation: things will get better and better until they reach an omega-point ("the day of Jesus Christ") and it is the task of Christians to work for that day. We are commissioned to build the kingdom of God, and its growth is a foregone conclusion.

There are two problems with that idea: 1) it is not we, but God, who is the subject of Paul's sentence—it is not our work, but God's, that will bring the work to completion. 2) Life contradicts it—things are not getting better and better.

The second response is a kind of fatalistic application of a specific theological model that connects the phrase, "the day of Jesus Christ" directly to a "second coming." The New Testament does make reference to Christ's return; and this second response points to that and says there's no need for us to do anything here and now—the injustices and the evil and the strife will always be with us. We're not called to work for peace and justice, because when Jesus comes again... HE will make all things right. Meanwhile, our work is to get people saved and wait for Christ's return.

There was some of that going on in Thessaloniki, and Paul wrote to them and said, "If a man won't work, he shall not eat." The anticipation of Christ's return still is used by some to justify doing nothing in the face of injustice and poverty.

In the text from Philippians, the phrase "the day of Christ Jesus" is connected to the previous phrase, "(I am) *thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* A first day—the day of Christ Jesus. And in between is the expression of confidence: "*I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion...*"

If we focus exclusively on "the day of Christ Jesus," we risk missing Paul's primary focus: "the good work God has begun in you", which is yet to be completed. In typical Pauline fashion, it takes several qualifying phrases for him finally to get to the point and identify what is the "good work God has begun in you." Verses 9 & 10: "*It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,* ¹⁰*so that you may approve* (this word also can be translated "discern" or "determine by testing". It is the same word used in Romans 12:2—"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may *discern* what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.") *what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,* ¹¹*filled with the fruits of righteousness* (and, again, this word also can be, and often is translated, "justice") *which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*"

Paul is talking about is God's work of redemption. The relationship between God and God's beloved human creatures always has been a rocky one.

In just a few weeks we'll enter the season of Advent. We'll acknowledge it with songs like, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here..." "Come, Thou Long-expected Jesus, born to set your people free".

Advent reminds us that something is afoot in God's world; an awesome, hopeful newness about life. Awesome because it promises to overthrow all our old, comfortable, sinful ways, and hopeful for that same reason. It is the working of the same God who brought Israel up out of Egyptian bondage and established Israel in the Promised Land; later, this same God brought Israel up out of Babylonian exile and established Israel again in the land. The work of redemption.

Both Advent and Paul's contrast between "the first day" and the "day of Christ Jesus" remind us of a time when this "Old" God of creation, this "Old God" of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this same God is breaking in upon human life in awesomely new ways—a Babe in a manger, a crucified, risen Lord, and a promise of redemption and newness of life.

And, here it is: *"I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

So how do we live in this "promise-not-yet-fulfilled" time? Do we work for peace and justice for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged among us? Or do we overlook earthly conditions and seek merely to save souls in preparation for Christ's return, when HE will erase all injustice and pain?

The reality is that both have a part of the truth. Some things are very important and deserve our most faithful efforts; other things are to be left to God, and part of our not-yet-completed work is to discern the difference.

So, what is our standard of discernment? We call ourselves Disciples of Christ; and one meaning of the word, "disciple" is "follower." The standard for our discernment is the one who said, "Follow me"—the one who reached out to the sick and the lonely and the poor and the neglected of society—the one who confronted the injustice of corrupted power—those who distorted religion and used it for profit at the expense of those who already were destitute—the one who washed his disciples' feet—the one who said, *"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."* (MATTHEW 25:35-36 NRSV)

While we wait for the day of Christ Jesus—while we wait for *"...he who began a good work in you (to) bring it to completion,"* we continue to live in unity and to live out our call to a servant vocation. And that is the purpose of unity.