

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

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6, 9-11 (NRSV) | I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing [*koínonía*] in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ... ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. ... ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

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 finished with us yet!*]

The Vision of this Congregation (which appears on the banner over our parlor area) is “to become a church that acknowledges, enables and encourages the journey of each person in the fulfillment of the calling to which God has called him or her.”

Where do you see that happening? Is it completed?

[*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, and thus, in a sense the “calling” of this congregation, is printed on the back of your worship bulletin: “to be a beacon of inclusive welcome and compassionate caring, reaching out proactively through the gifts and resources of our people to administer wholeness in a fragmented world.”

“ Where do you see that happening? Is it 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 told 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 for success. 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: (I am) *thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*. I could have written these same words to you. *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 there's a "day of completion."

Our own lives—the uncertainties and upheavals surrounding us—remind us 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 usual responses:

The first is a kind of utopian expectation that things are going to get better and better until they reach an omega-point (the "day of completion"; "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 understanding: (1) it is God who is the subject of the sentence, not us—it is God's work, and not ours, that will bring about the day of completion. (2) The second problem is that life contradicts it—things are not getting better and better.

So, the second response in the promise-not-yet-fulfilled world is a kind of fatalism: why bother, no matter how hard we work, the outcome is not up to us.

The truth is that some things are very important and deserve our most faithful efforts; other things are to be left to God, and part of our work is to discern the difference, and while we wait for that day of completion to live in unity and to live out a servant vocation.

I remember a story my teacher told about a family up the street: three or four girls, one of them attractive, about fourteen years old. This was in the '70s—rural Oklahoma. Things were a bit different back then—different standards; different values.

She was truant at school, into marijuana, always in trouble, always up before the judge, chasing around and hanging onto the rear end of every motorcycle that went roaring through the neighborhood. She finally was so involved in misdemeanors that the judge said, "You're going to the reform school in southern Oklahoma."

She was sent to a detention home for girls, down near Lawton, and about the fourth or fifth month she was there she gave birth to the child she was carrying. She was fifteen at the time.

Word came some months later that she was coming home. "Will she come

back to our neighborhood?" "Will she have that baby with her?"

Fred said, "The day we heard she was to come we were all out in our yards, mowing our grass; watching the house. She didn't come, and we kept watching the house and mowing the grass. I was down to about a blade at a time, you know, watching the house, when a car pulled in the driveway—and out steps...

"It's Cathy. She has the baby. She brought home the baby."

People in the house ran out and grabbed her and took turns holding the baby, and they were all laughing and crying, and then they went in, and another car pulled up. And then another car, and another. They started parking in the street. You couldn't have gotten a Christian car down the street; just cars on either side, and they're all gathering there you know.

Fred said, "Suddenly I got nervous and went into my own house. It struck me, what if one of them saw me down in the yard and said, 'Hey, Fred, she's home and she has the baby. We're having a party, and we'd like you and Nettie to come.'"

"Well, I have a lot of papers to grade and all."

Would I have gone to that party? Would you? It's easier to preach the parable of the Prodigal Son than to go to the party. It's easier to talk about living the faith than to go outside in the neighborhood and really live it.

So how do we live in this time of the "promise-not-yet-fulfilled"? Here is Paul's strategy: "...*one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*"

For us, a promised time is about to come about. The first day I stood in this pulpit I asked you three questions:

1. *Do you believe God still speaks to God's people?*
2. *Do you believe God's people can hear and understand when God speaks?*
3. *Will you commit to be and do what you discern God calling you to be and do?*

You said yes to all three questions. Remembering your response to those questions, can we enter this new time, recognizing that whatever good has happened or is happening in our congregation is initiated by God? And can we recognize that nothing bad that has happened here comes from God? Is that a place we can unite, with our lives open to the reality we still have to do the work; but also to the promise that God already has given us all we need—the Spiritual Gifts needed—to do the work, and when we use those gifts, "*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ?*"