

“Working Side By Side”

October 12, 2008 – Philippians 4:1-9

INTRO: A mentor and friend of mine who served churches for some forty years, loved the book of Philippians. He would often comment that if the church could just follow the instructions found in this book, we would be in better shape. We believe the apostle Paul was its author, and we hear repeatedly in its verses that he has affection for the early church at Philippi. Yet he also has concerns about them. “His gratitude and his anxiety” can be heard in the verses we turn to today. (Ernest Scott)

I didn't see all of the last Brewers Phillies game, but I did see an amazing play that no one could remember ever seeing before at Miller Park. In the sixth inning, Phillies' Jayson Werth hit a fly so high toward left field that it struck one of the support cables under the roof. Balls in fair territory that strike the roof are still in play. This particular ball, as it struck the roof, was redirected dramatically from left field to the infield. As I remember it, Ryan Braun, in the outfield, saw what was happening, and gave a heads up signal to the other Brewers players. Third baseman Craig Counsell was alert, and followed the trajectory of the ball and made a diving catch for the out. (*Journal Sentinel* 10-5-08)

What an example of team-work—of people working together for the benefit of the whole. We know that it's not always seen in baseball teams, so when it's there, it's fun to watch.

The financial meltdown has been one of those situations where we more than ever can see that we're going to have to work together so we can all survive this. It's a time when pretty much everybody is affected somehow. And, in fact, it is going to take leaders from around the world, working together to find something that may help. “The US and six other nations that are among the world's richest nations agreed on Friday to a coordinated plan to rescue the financial industry. The US, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, and Japan have committed themselves to five principles ranging from preventing the failure of important banks to protecting the bank deposits of savers.” (*The Journal Sentinel*, 10/11/08)

Leaders came together, to work together, and try to resolve the crisis. The more we understand this as a global problem, the better able we will be to see that it's going to take the participation of leaders across national lines.

Recently the Milwaukee area has seen a rise in assaults on bus drivers and bus passengers. The transit system has made some proposals for improving the safety aboard buses. And, they've decided they can't do it all on their own. They have asked for help. The Guardian Angels, a national citizen volunteer crime-fighting organization is beginning to patrol two Milwaukee bus routes. The hope is that with more persons present who can intervene for the security and safety of passengers and drivers, things can be turned around for the good of all.

The apostle Paul became aware of problems that had developed in the church at Philippi, which began with a couple individuals, and had had an effect on the whole community. Two leaders in the church—two women by the names of Euodia and Syntyche were quarreling with each other. We don't know the specifics of the argument, but we do know that these women are colleagues of Paul—they are very dear to him, because they have been working along with him, in the work of the gospel. “The common task that once bound them together has given way to their separate agendas. They are no more two working as one, but two working as two.” (Fred Craddock)

And, now their disunity threatens the unity of the rest of the group. “The conflict hasn't remained confined to the two individuals involved, but has spread among the rest of the members.” (R. Craig MacCreary)

So, Paul asks for help from the rest of the congregation. He sees the community as a whole, where the ministry is shared, and when any work needs to be done, others are asked to step up to the plate. “They will have a role in either continuing the struggle or ending it. They will be a part of the answer or a part of the problem.” (R. Craig MacCreary)

“In Paul's view, the nature and function of the congregation is to be a partnership. Being members one of another means laying before each other joys, sorrows, burdens, and also issues to be solved.” (Fred Craddock)

Like many of us, Paul probably knew that “if conflict takes our energies, then we have no energy left for doing what we're supposed to do.” (David Farmer)

Paul reminds these women that they belong to Christ, and perhaps it would do them some good to become grounded again in Christ--the One who transcends them both. In setting this challenge before the contentious women, and in asking for the help of the community, Paul is asking for a renewed commitment from all of them. He has tried to model his own life, so that people would see that he gives himself away for the ministry of Christ. He is encouraging the people to do the same—to share more of themselves for the well-being of the fledgling church.

Paul was a supporter of mutual ministry—we are all in this together, and it's going to take the gifts of all, to make it the best it can be. And there are a number of things that can work to the detriment of a mutual understanding of ministry. Sometimes people believe that the staff are hired to do the work of the church, and there should be nothing expected from others.

Sometimes clergy are reluctant to share the ministry. We can too easily get an inflated sense of our role. The story is told of twelve pastors who were on a plane going to a conference in Seattle. When they came into a large storm, those pastors told the flight attendants to tell the pilot that everything would be OK, because twelve pastors were on board. Later one flight attendant returned from the cockpit. "What did the pilot say?" one pastor asked playfully. "He said he was glad to have twelve pastors on board, but he would rather have four good engines."

And, sometimes people in the church are hesitant to respond, even when their service is requested, and repeated calls go out for people to help. Either they think someone else could do the job better, or they are just too busy.

I'm here today, to tell you, that I'm with Paul on all this—if we are truly going to be Christ's followers and part of a church, this has to be a mutual ministry. Jesus began it this way—it wasn't just him, but he first reached out to the twelve, and they worked side by side with him.

We need people who will be willing to step up to the plate when things need to be done around here—all the way from helping to usher, to serving as coffee host or liturgist. Every Sunday, the Christian Ed department needs about 14 people to serve as teachers and shepherds in the Sunday School. Yes, we've hired Kristin to administer our whole Christian Ed program, but it's obvious she can't divide herself into 14 roles each week.

And we need people, just like Paul did, who will do everything they can, to help support the ministry of the church.

It is said there are four main bones in every organization. The wish-bones: Wishing somebody else would do something. The jaw-bones: Doing all the talking but very little else. The knuckle-bones: Those who knock everything. The back-bones: Those who carry the brunt of the load and do most of the work. (Bits & Pieces, October 15, 1992)

In a beehive producing 100-200 pounds of honey a year, a single bee generates only one-twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in its lifetime. But because the 80,000 to 90,000 bees that comprise one hive work together and attack common enemies, not each other, they can produce an amazing amount of honey.

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came to a large stone. The boy said to his father, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move this rock?" His father answered, "If you use all your strength, I am sure you can do it." The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock didn't move. Discouraged, he said to his father, "You were wrong. I can't do it." The father placed his arm around the boy's shoulder and said, "No, Son, you didn't use all your strength—you didn't ask me to help."

We fail when we either don't ask for help, or when those we ask, aren't willing to step up to the plate. The church needs us all working together, to strengthen our ministries.

A mule named Jim was being driven by his owner. When everyone got on the wagon, the driver yelled Giddyup, Jim. Giddyup, Sue. Giddyup, Sam. Giddyup, John. Giddyup, Joe. As the wagon started to move, one of the passengers said: When Jim is the only one there, why did you call all those other names? The owner replied: Because if Jim knew he was the only one pulling this wagon, he'd never budge an inch.

It takes teamwork—working side by side with others. Whether it's the group of seven countries working together on the financial crisis, the family who questions their financial stability at this time, or the contemporary church trying to reinvent itself, interdependence is called for. We can no longer go along thinking we are alone.

And our ability to survive and thrive, depends on all of us being involved and being concerned for the other, and relying on the power of God to work among us.

This last week I got my twelve string guitar out of the case, to tune it up in preparation for the Pet Blessing service yesterday. It has 12 strings, rather than 6, meaning that each pair of strings is tuned to the same note, an octave apart. Well, sometime this summer, the very top string on my guitar must have broken. And I didn't know it until I opened the case. Now, I went ahead and played it anyway, we still had that note provided by the one measly string. But it needs the second of the pair, to really give the fullest sound.

Maybe that's a useful metaphor for the church. A few people working on a project will do their best, to get things done, but the whole compliment of us, taking responsibility, working side by side, making a commitment—that's really the way we can grow into God's best intentions for us.

--Sue Burwell