

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

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PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11 (RSV) *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup>always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup>thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>it is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. <sup>8</sup>For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup>And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup>so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup>filled with the fruits*

*of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. ...*

<sup>3:13</sup>*Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

ROMANS 12:1-2 *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

[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** (printed on the back of your bulletin and displayed in frames throughout this facility) is "to be a a community teamed with Christ, always growing in worship, fellowship and service, within and beyond our congregation." Where do you see that happening?

*[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 "to To passionately engage others with the love of Christ by discovering and using our gifts of service in commitment to humanity and in service to the community." Where do you see that happening?

*[God completes what God begins! But God's work is not yet finished! God isn't through with us yet!]*

God completes what God begins!

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 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 a "day of completion," which he calls "the day of Jesus Christ."

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 world, 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 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 that divorced and led three or four youngsters, girls, one of them attractive, prematurely mature, and about fourteen years old. This was in the '70s—in 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 to the neighborhood some months later that she was coming home. "Will she have that baby with her?" "Is she really coming home, back to our neighborhood?"

The day we heard she was to come, we were all out in our yards, mowing our grass and watching the house. She didn't come. Nobody showed, 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 in. And then another car pulled in, 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.

Suddenly I got nervous and went into my own house. It suddenly 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 "promise-not-yet-fulfilled" time? Later in this same letter Paul gives us a hint as he shares his own personal life strategy: "...*one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup>I 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. *Are you willing to commit to be and do what God calls you to be and do?*

You answered affirmatively 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 stand, and open our lives to the promise that *"he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ?"*