

Working Together

After all my years of being with you, you know by now that I have some interesting quirks and eccentricities, especially for a preacher. You know that I like Studebakers, old blue jeans, flannel shirts, pickup trucks and Apple computers. You may or may not know that I really like running water fountains. At last count I have five of them, two of which I justify by telling Betty Jane that they add needed moisture to the air to offset the drying effects of our furnace and wood stove.

Something that I don't think anyone knows about me, including Betty Jane, is that I have a certain fascination with ants. In the idle days of my youth, I once wrote an essay for school based on my observation of a trail of ants marching up one of the ruts on the dirt lane along which I grew up. The ants were obviously going home from sort of work, or perhaps from a military campaign. I noticed that they carried pieces of food or plunder, often much larger than the individual ants who carried them. I noticed that they marched in single file and in a straight line as long as the terrain permitted it. I saw that they carried several dead comrades home with them, for food or for funeral rites, I couldn't tell.

I was also intrigued by the many red ant hills that were common on the south side of the ridges near my home. They reminded me of ancient Egyptian pyramids, filled with secret passages and ant treasure. But unlike the pyramids of Egypt, the ant pyramids were not primarily graves for the dead but thriving cities or colonies ruled by a queen in every one.

But the most interesting thing about ants is how they all work together to achieve a common goal. Ants are busy. Ants, working together, get things done. And, as much as we don't like them crawling around in our kitchens and on our patios or getting into the food on our picnic tables, ants are good for the environment. Working together, they process rotting wood into fertile mulch, mix and aerate the soil like earthworms, and feed on smaller insects that infest crops.

Ants can also be very entertaining. I have a cousin a year older than I am, who came to my house for a visit one summer. He was from the big city and was unfamiliar with the ways of ants in the wild.

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On a hike together, I warned him to stay clear of the red ant hills, but he refused to believe that they posed any danger. So I challenged him. I said, "if you don't believe me, I dare you to jump into one and see what happens." After taking me up on that dare, my cousin had a new respect for red ants and for my knowledge of the wild.

But I want to come back to the subject of working together to get things done. You may or may not consider the fact that our Lord Jesus commanded His disciples to get things done. Being disciples of Jesus Christ is not just about reading scripture, saying prayers, going to church and Sunday School, listening to sermons and singing hymns. In fact, if that's all there is to it, it's no wonder more people aren't drawn to it. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 say, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*" Ephesians 2:8-10 say, "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"

We notice here that the fruit of righteousness and the fruit of our salvation is being thoroughly equipped for doing good and doing the good works God has prepared for us to do. This puts new light on the verse that appears as our pre-worship thought in today's bulletin. Leviticus 19:2 includes the command: "*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy,*" We now know that holiness is not just a matter of staying out of trouble or keeping our angelic halos level. Holiness is godliness and being like God means being creative and doing good for the benefit of others.

What's more, this is where the action is, where the joy of our faith is to be experienced and how people outside the family of God may be persuaded to come in. One thing I've learned from our church's participation in several Love Feasts to feed the hungry, is that doing something good together in the name of Jesus is powerful. It collects interest, generates joy, and brings blessing across all genders, generations, and economic brackets within our church. Men and Women, young and old, rich and poor—everybody who participates in this good work gets blessed. It's awesome stuff.

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But the greatest joy for me is to witness our church doing kingdom work and members working together with the joy of the Lord upon us. We may not be very big. We may not have a lot of money. We may not be well known in our community. But, **If we keep doing stuff like this together there is no limit to the wonderful things God will do in us, among us and through us.**

In our scripture passage from I Corinthians 3:1-10 & verses 21-23, Paul tells us something about working together well. He does this through citing the bad example given by some in the church at Corinth. In verses 1 and 3 He tells them: "*Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. . . . You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?"*

The problem in the church at Corinth in the time of Paul, was that it was divided into factions. It's sort of like the Democrats and Republicans in our nation today. Each side seems more interested in its own agenda and in wielding its own power than in working together for the good of the nation. And rather than thinking of ourselves as Americans, our nation is now divided into many opposing factions, each looking out for its own interests rather than working for something that would be good for everybody. So we have African American Americans, Hispanic American Americans, Chinese American Americans, White American Americans, Native American Americans, etc., etc. Apparently the Melting Pot America, where we were all becoming one nation under God, has become a cracked pot, broken into many pieces. If we keep going in this direction we won't even be able to build an ant hill together, let alone rebuild a great nation.

In the church at Corinth the immature Christians were chopping themselves into factions by people tracing their spiritual lineages from one or other of the apostles. Some were proud that they came to Christ under the ministry of Paul. Some claimed Peter, while others swore allegiance to Apollos. Paul identifies this practice as very immature behavior and calls upon the church to stop aligning themselves with one spiritual leader or another and to align themselves to Christ. For if the church is to be effective in working together it must find its commonality and communion in Christ. As Paul says in I Corinthians

3:11, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

Paul also gives instruction about how to view church leaders. In verses 5-7 he says: “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”

In verses 21-23 Paul finishes his thought on this subject with these words: “So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”

Paul challenges the believers at Corinth to think of their various leaders as servants all working together to do various tasks under the leadership of Christ. None is to be considered more important than another and certainly none are to be used to divide the body of Christ.

Nevertheless, it is a persistent characteristic of what Paul calls “mere men,” or “mere humans” to choose sides and, through their desire to distinguish themselves one above the other, divide themselves into warring factions. But we are not to be just “mere men,” “mere women,” or “mere humans.” We are called to be Christ’s men, God’s women, God’s holy people and little Christs. **We are to be a peculiar people who work together in love by allowing the Holy Spirit to govern our attitudes, words, and actions.**

We also note in our scripture readings today that the believers at Corinth were not the first believers to act in an immature fashion. We see the same tendency among the first followers of Jesus, even among the original 12 apostles. In Luke 22:24-27 we read:

“A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the

table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.’” Thus Jesus reminded the twelve to avoid quarreling among themselves and to serve one another and to reach out to serve the world in love.

Now frankly, I have no quarrel with anyone here this morning. I have been very pleased with how we have been working together for the Love Feasts and for other ministries we have carried out lately. I think there has been a great sense of camaraderie among us as we serve others. Rather than being jealous of one another or trying to “get one up” on anyone else, I sense that we are proud of each other and grateful to see what God is doing in and with each of us. This is how it should be and I praise the Lord for making it so.

As I bring this message to a close this morning I would call our attention to two things. Back to the ants: Observe how they humbly work together for the common good. Their colonies are built and sustained not by selfish competition but through selfless cooperation. What they do by instinct we must choose to do by the power of Christ within us.

The other thing I would have us take home today is found in the thoughts presented in the song sung by our choir this morning. The true church is not a building with a steeple on top. It’s not a house of wood or glass or stone. The true church is frail people standing strong on Jesus as their sure foundation. The true church isn’t built around a particular pastor or by any one denomination. The true church is made up of flesh and bone and flesh and blood people led by the hand of God. The true church is people filled with the love of God reaching out to other people, bringing walls of hatred down, turning strangers into friends and making them part of the family of God. Under the Leadership of Christ, let us be a church doing good things together to save others for the Glory of God.

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I Corinthians 3:1-10, 21-23;

Luke 22:24-27

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