

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2018
Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD
Readings: Luke 9:46-48; Philippians 1: 1-18a

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

On Thursday, Phyllis agreed to become a partner in the gospel with me. I confessed my terribly erratic visitation of our homebound members — of which she is one. I enjoy visiting. I really do. It just seems when I have it in my head to schedule a visit, something pop up here at church and it gets pushed to the back burner. If I supplied the names and phone numbers of folks I needed to visit and a list of dates and times each month that I was available, I asked Phyllis if she would call and schedule the visits. Then I would have the visits on my calendar to work other appointments around. She said yes. She said she would be happy to do it. She would be happy to be a way to keep the homebound connected to the community of Haven. I am so very grateful to have her as a partner in the gospel.

She isn't the only one with whom I have a partnership in the gospel. There are the twelve who agreed to be connectors here at Haven — keeping in touch with our members who are present or somehow disconnected. Then there are the members of the Congregational Council. Mary, the church secretary, who goes beyond the required. Those who watch children in the nursery while parents worship, the choirs, music director, greeters, ushers, acolytes, communion assistants, Craig who follows up on guests who visited; the Altar Guild, Haven's Teams, everyone who makes donations and volunteers to maintain God's church here and to extend its ministry into the community. We are partners in the gospel.

Many of you carry our partnership in the gospel into volunteer work with the Lions, Lionesses, Ruritans, Women's Club, Boy Scouts, Hospice, and more.

Then again, we are in partnership with other local churches to extend the gospel to children through Micah's backpacks and VBS, to the elderly at Holly Place, to the hungry at St. Mark's Food Bank and the homeless at REACH. We are in partnership in the gospel with the DE-MD Synod the ELCA who are helping five new worship communities to start this year in our Synod. We are partners in the gospel with ELCA World Hunger or ELCA Disaster Relief, who, in turn, send needed staff and supplies, for the long haul, to help hurting and ravaged communities, in the U.S. and the world, build and rebuild their lives.

When Haven decided to invest part of its assets in the ELCA Mission Fund, we became partners in the gospel with Christ Lutheran Church in Minot, North Dakota who got a loan from the Mission Fund to recover from the devastating 2011 flood that destroyed it and much of the town. We also became partners in the gospel with St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Medina, Ohio who was able to get a loan to buy a nearby six unit apartment building to provide housing for families in need in their neighborhood.

"To share in the gospel is to grasp the fullness of what it means to embrace and live in the good news of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ."¹ "The gospel is no lone ranger enterprise. It's a partnership [with the Lord] of all the saints [---- those who came before us, those who here now, those who are elsewhere in God's creation —] the whole church."² Did you hear how Paul

addressed his letter to the church at Philippi? He called himself a servant of Christ and greeted the entire Christian community at Philippi. Not just the elder or leaders, but all. There was no chain of command but, instead, a communion of saints — “for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

Ever since he met Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul’s entire whole ministry was about partnership in the gospel. There was Ananias, send by God to heal Paul’s blindness and the local Christian community who first welcomed him and told him the stories of Jesus. When he’d go on mission trips, Paul had partners to travel with — like, Barnabas, Timothy, and Silas. When he was able to get some folks to listen to the gospel in a town, he had people who would provide the space to meet and women and men he would mentor to lead the Christian community when he had to move on. “While Paul seems like a pretty big personality [and a force to reckon with,] he was NOT a lone ranger.”³ [When he was in prison] he depended on other followers of Jesus to provide the basics, like blankets and food. But most importantly, he depended on the other followers of Jesus to spread the good news of God’s saving love and future.

That is why Paul can be suffering in jail and still rejoice. His imprisonment for Christ has become a witness of faith to the Roman guards. He writes, “Most of the brothers and sister, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with great boldness and without fear.” Like

the jailing of other leaders, like Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King, Jr, Paul's imprisonment didn't quieted the gospel but increased the volume, as more and more people picked up the banner of Christ to proclaim God's truth. Even when it seemed some were spreading the gospel out of envy or jealousy of him, Paul still rejoiced because at least the gospel was being proclaimed. And Paul knows that the true Word of God is more powerful than the one who preaches it. Thanks be to God.

We are not just members of a church, my brothers and sisters. This is not a social club. We are partners in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We listen, we pray, we sing, we receive communion, we share one another's joys and sorrows, we go out to serve and share the good news. We all "share in the gospel" as a community of believers. This is a very different way of thinking than others who focus on individual salvation and "when were you saved." "The good news of Jesus, our experience of God's love and grace, is not an individual possession but a communal reality that God is enacting all the time and in which we are invited to participate. Instead of focusing on individuals, Paul call attention to "all the saints," who, together as a community, share in the gospel. [Which] means sharing alike in the joys and in the sufferings of our common life on behalf of God's love for the world."⁴

That is why worshiping regularly and being active in a church community is of great importance. It is not just "me and Jesus". It is **us** and Jesus extending

God's love, mercy, grace and compassion in the world. Jesus called his disciples and followers to be in community with him and one another, to form a partnership with God's vast and varied people to spread the gospel.

Jay [not his real name] told me last Wednesday how the Lord has been at work in his life. He now can pray and walk away when he wants to lose his usually quick temper. His friend is unhappy with all the negativity where he works. Jay listens. Jay prays with his friend. Jay tells his friend that God is using him at his work to bring God's peaceful spirit into the chaos. Jay comes to worship and Bible study every chance he gets because he says he needs to know there are others who are trying to follow and share Jesus. Such a lifestyle is no easy thing, as we all know. It is particularly difficult when you are at the Maryland Correctional Training Center, where I study the Bible with Jay.

Jay is counting on the community of Christ, within and outside the prison walls, to be his partner in the gospel — through prayer, through sending pastors to lead worship and Bible study, by uplifting the gospel truth that every person is loved by God. We are partners in the gospel with Jay and all believers, joined together in Christ for God's saving work in a distressed, depressed, disturbed world. We are partners with Christ — who provides the very meaning and power of our community. I give thanks for you as we share in God's gospel at this place, in this time. I believe our partnership in the gospel is important. It is worth the struggle and risks to strain toward a future and new ways to proclaim gospel. So,

let Paul's prayer be ours, "that our love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us determine what is best." And, as it is translated in The Message Bible translation: Live a lover's life, judicious and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God."⁵ The gospel IS our mission. That is our joy in all circumstances. Amen, partners, Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 5/5/18

ENDNOTES

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1. Edward Pillar, "Commentary on Philippians 1: 3-11" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 2. Amy Oden, "Commentary on Philippians 1:1-18a" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org.
 3. Ibid
 4. Ibid
 5. Eugene Peterson, The Message at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/msg/philippians/1.html>