

“Build Each Other Up”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
November 16th, 2014
23rd Sun. after Pentecost
Stewardship Sunday

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matt. 25:14-30

*So continue encouraging each other and building each other up,
just like you are doing already.*

1 Thess. 5:11

Let us pray... O God,

May we continue to build each other up and grow by your grace,
as we seek the glory of your ‘Kingdom come’ to be a social reality.

Amen

‘Building each other up’ – These words of the Apostle Paul were said
in anticipation that Christ would soon return.

The early Christian church was under a lot of challenges to its survival –
They were in competition with the Jewish community,
and were distrusted as a threat by the Romans.

There were pressures from within the Church over
whether or not to keep following Jewish traditions,
or whether to allow Gnostic beliefs to shape their faith and practice.

So, the first Christians were anxious for Christ to return
to straighten it all out and establish his Kingdom.

In the meantime, Paul urged them to just keep ‘building each other up’.
Even though the Kingdom had not yet come in the way they expected,
in some ways, it was already true – for them then and for us here now...

Jesus provided parables to describe the Kingdom of Heaven –
both what it is and what it is not.

The Gospel lesson today is assumed to be such a parable;

However, there is no reference to ‘The Kingdom’ at all.

It is like the lesson last week in which the Kingdom of Heaven is in sharp contrast
with how the world really works.

You may recognize last month’s Children of God sermon was based on today’s
Parable of the Talents, updated in terms of the subprime loan crisis
which led to the Great Recession; Here’s a synopsis...

Before the CEO of a financial company leaves for a trip, he tells the vice president
to distribute risky loans to his sales people to find investors.

The vice president then pushes them off on the middle manager,
who hangs onto the worst loans, and gives the rest to his team
with instructions to work with the debtors.

The loans fail anyway and the CEO returns to a disaster.

Willard, p.2

In the skit, Jesus as a wise gardener, shows up to save the company,
but also to reward and punish.

Those who tried to do their best to keep the loans from defaulting
were rewarded.

The vice president who shirked responsibility was ultimately
exiled to the mail room.

Authority figures in Christ's parables are not assumed to be God –
and so, neither is the CEO of this skit, who nevertheless
gets a nice severance package despite his mismanagement.

If Jesus showed up tomorrow, would it mean that
all the inequities and injustices of the world would be put right
and everybody live happily ever after?

It sure seems the problems of the world are a lot more complicated than that,
but then they have always been that way.

There is a saying that 'life is what happens in the meantime'.

We are between where we were and where we want to be.

The same is true for God's Kingdom of Heaven.

It is both what is yet to come and what is already here.

In this world we need 'grace'... and grace is another way of talking about
miracles – the right thing at the right time.

You may not always recognize the grace in your life right away –

Sometimes gaining an insight about how grace was at work in your life
may not come for many years.

It can be what you needed to get through a bad situation,
or even the blessing of a roadblock to redirect you to a new path.

The goal is 'glory'... which is like joy, and not something
you can point to easily or capture, but it is the goal we seek –
and what we can experience from time to time, along the way.

It is the way things ought to be – but seldom are,
the glory of God as a world that is peaceful and just.

Luke 17:21 says, 'the Kingdom of God is within you' – or 'in the midst of you',
which can mean an inward spiritual reality,

or something that is happening right along with everything else.

So in the meantime, we just have to keep 'building each other up'.

Though the Kingdom has not yet come, in some ways, it is already here...

Paul spoke of the imminent return of Christ,

the establishment of God's Kingdom of Heaven as a catastrophic event

for which the believers would be prepared – so long as they were vigilant.

Paul urged them to be prepared – and to keep building each other up.

That still applies to us, too – both the waiting and the preparing...

Willard, p.3

We have to keep doing “the loving thing” – that which is most loving.

The Kingdom happens when we step up to challenge injustice;

The Kingdom happens when we show kindness;

...when we create instead of destroy;

...when we heal instead of injure;

...when we forgive instead of hate;

...when we show love.

So, the dynamic of doing the loving thing, whether you succeed or not,
is the state of living in grace – *and* the glory.

It is both what we hope for and what already is.

When you do the loving thing, you are already in the Kingdom of Heaven –

It is its own reward.

Jesus and Paul were both speaking to people who would face hardship
in the rejection by their own people and oppression by Romans.

Jesus would be arrested, tried, and crucified and the disciples
would be scattered.

What would bring them back from these tragic events?

What is substantial in the midst of changing fortunes?

What is substantial, is relationship – especially in times of crisis, when things fail,
it’s our relationships that we fall back on – family and friends,
and in a church, that circle widens to include
whoever someone is and wherever they are on their journey.

In a church, we have to keep building each other up,
relying on each other in times of trial.

Paul was pointing out that this is a distinct advantage of a faith community –
over the situation of not having such ‘ties that bind’ when needed.

One of the ways that community is formed is when people share their talents.

By taking Jesus’ parable in a literal way, we can see we need to invest ourselves
by sharing our talents – and not burying them.

By sharing our talents with others –by risking vulnerability,
others are encouraged to share their gifts, too.

That is all part of making community happen – and the next thing you know,
Christ shows up and you are in the midst of the Kingdom.

When I was at the summer camp called the Bethany Beach Folk Arts Festival,
I remember that if someone did something special
that risked revealing who they were by a dance or a song –
they were given a ‘popper’.

These poppers were little paper cylinders with a cord to pull,
and – with a pop! , it would send up a little parachute into the air.

Willard, p.4

It was a way to celebrate being who you are in the midst of a receptive audience.
The Kingdom of Heaven is like getting a popper,
and then a group hug from 60 high school kids.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like sharing your art to show others who you are
and helping them to be who they are, and then to help others, in turn.
So, who are you? What is your talent?
How are you living up to the potential of who you were created to be?
How are you helping others to be who they are?

When you put yourself out there, sharing your gift, you may not always get thanks,
but go ahead and celebrate yourself for trying – and listen for God’s joy, too.
You can take pride in your contribution and sharing your talent.

When we receive new members, a phrase from Ephesians 2 is used in the liturgy:
*‘You are no longer strangers and sojourners,
but you are equally citizens with the saints and
members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Christ Jesus alone being the cornerstone,
in whom the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in Christ;
in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place
of God in the Spirit.*

We are the building blocks of this Christian congregation
and our talents help hold it all together.

So, we got to keep building each other up.

Though the kingdom is yet to come, even so it is already here too.

Last Sunday, November 9th was the 25th anniversary of the Fall of the Wall –
a day that should be remembered with joy for the whole world.

In our wildest dreams, could any of us have imagined the Soviet Union
crumbling in the way that it did?

The churches behind the Iron Curtain helped that happen,
by providing a meeting place for such movements as ‘Solidarity’, to organize.
The people had outgrown the walls that kept them cut off from the rest of the world
and from being themselves.

There have been a lot of missed opportunities for a better world since that time,
but such wonderful things can happen and this did happen.

Perhaps the next time we will be ready as we continue to believe that –

though the Kingdom has not yet come, in some ways, it is already here...

So in the meantime, we just have to keep ‘building each other up’.

Amen.

*Our lesson from 1st Thessalonians 5:1-11 today is about how
the early Christian church expected Jesus' imminent return.*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

^{5:1}We don't need to write to you about the timing and dates,
brothers and sisters.

²You know very well that the day of the Lord
is going to come like a thief in the night.

³When they are saying,
"There is peace and security,"
at that time sudden destruction will attack them,
like labor pains start with a pregnant woman,
and they definitely won't escape.

⁴But you aren't in darkness, brothers and sisters,
so the day won't catch you by surprise like a thief.

⁵All of you are children of light and children of the day.
We don't belong to night or darkness.

⁶So then, let's not sleep like the others,
but let's stay awake and stay sober.

⁷People who sleep sleep at night,
and people who get drunk get drunk at night.

⁸Since we belong to the day,
let's stay sober, wearing faithfulness and love as a piece of armor
that protects our body
and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

⁹God didn't intend for us to suffer his wrath
but rather to possess salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁰Jesus died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep,
we will live together with him.

¹¹So continue encouraging each other and building each other up,
just like you are doing already.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

Matt. 25:14-30[RSV]

[Jesus said,]

^{25:14} “For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property;

¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more.

¹⁷ So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more.

¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’

²¹ His master said to him,

‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’

²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying,

‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’

²³ His master said to him,

‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’

²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying,

‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow;

²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.

Here you have what is yours.’

²⁶ But his master answered him,

‘You wicked and slothful servant!

You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed?

²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest.

²⁸ So take the talent from him,

and give it to him who has the ten talents.

²⁹ For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’