

"A good work"

Sunday, October 11, 2020

A sermon by the Rev. Glen Soderholm

Philippians 1: 6 " being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ"

Beginnings are important: Preparing for my parents 50th Wedding anniversary slideshow, my brother and I were going through old photographs. My parents holding me as new born - what was their dream? Pentecostal pastor - no! hands by sides, Presbyterian! Concert violinist? Doctor? Every parent dreams. Every person loves a clean slate - a new beginning. Every new hockey season, Leaf fans think - maybe this year! New school year - maybe straight A's!

The apostle Paul is writing a letter of encouragement to a relatively new community of Christ followers. He was there at the beginning, and is following their progress in being disciples of Jesus; and he is confident that *the one who began a good work in them will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Who is the one, and what is the good work? Well, the one is the three in one!

The Apostle Paul knew that our beginnings lie in the heart of the triune God of grace - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who has had us in mind from before the foundation of the world, and who chose to love us by creating us for relationship.

Ps. 139 eloquently describes this:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me when none of them as yet existed.

What is the good work?

It is the process of being brought into the fullness of our God designed humanity, as written in Ephesians 4, being brought to maturity, to the full measure of the stature of Christ as the body of Christ. To establish a people.

And the good work is the establishing of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

God is someone who begins things. See the glint in God's eye as creation unfolds a dream for creation that involved human beings as full partners sharing communion with the Trinity. That sounds good!

But our experience of life might raise a red flag. Because as we grow up we discover that we live in a world where people begin a lot of ambitious things with good intentions, but they don't always finish.

I came across a web-site a guy has compiled that catalogues unfinished buildings. From the Siena Cathedral and the Duomo in Italy, The Old Royal naval college in England the national monument in Scotland, he documents some of what he calls heroic blunders of good intentions gone incomplete. And these stories and monuments stand as a testimony to human ambition, and of course human frailty.

Everyone of us has stories of good intentions, of things that we started but did not get finished. How many of us believed we were going to make it to the Olympics, or be a movie star, or cure cancer. If we started to record all the unfinished projects of our lives, we would likely feel pretty depressed as we stared at that list.

Paul writes letters like these to encourage new churches he has planted. These letters typically address their problems and struggles, because it's hard to sustain community, and they do the things that humans do: disagree, let their egos get in the way, want the biggest piece of the pie, take their ball and go home in anger, or just drift away.

In a church I previously pastored, a long time member just stopped participating in communion. This was noticed by those who served in the pews, and once it was noticed, and it was found out that he didn't like the changes that had been made to the order. This is called passive/aggressive behavior. Churches are full of that stuff.

I'm currently serving as what's called an interim moderator for one of our Presbyterian Churches in Galt. It's a big magnificent structure that seats 500 people in the sanctuary, and there are about 40 or so there on a Sunday now, about a quarter of them under the age of 65. The congregation just voted two weeks ago to call it quits after 175 years of being church there in Galt.

It's becoming even more common In North America. We often hear about the mega-churches and success stories - but the reality is that most churches *struggle* to survive.

Did God not begin a good work in them? We have an epidemic of doubt and distress among young people who were baptized and nurtured in the faith, and they do not see the institutional church as credible in light of contemporary ways of being in culture.

Did God not begin a good work in them? Maybe that's true of some of you here today, for all kinds of possible reasons.

Did God not begin a good work in you? Sometimes we blame God. Is it possible that we make out God to be someone who started a good work in the creation and in the crowning glory of his creation, human beings, but finally realized that we could in no way live up to the grand idea, and then like those unfinished buildings, left us to fend for ourselves against the elements and vagaries of life?

It often feels like really great things don't last forever, is that why we're always trying to find a new thing? Sometimes we blame ourselves. We didn't use the right technique, or we had the wrong pastor. Whatever the case may be, we find ourselves on shaky ground.

PBPGINFWMY. Please be patient, God is not finished with me yet.

Or maybe every church should have this on their sign out front . . .

Why? Because Paul tells us something radically different. He is confident : *the one who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

I'm here to say that God doesn't begin things, and leave them to peter out God does not begin this life, and then leave it up to us to figure out how to get through it. God promises to finish what has begun.

One day, Pope Julius II was watching Michaelangelo, one of the greatest sculptors of all time, slaving over a bloc of marble. Pope Julius asked him, "Why do you hit so hard?" Michaelangelo answered, "Can't you see the angel imprisoned in this block of stone? I am trying to set the angel free."

I think that story gives me a clue to what Paul is saying. I think he is saying that God sees us as these imprisoned angels. However, God rarely spring us out of the stone of sin and unfulfilled dreams and messed up community with a kind of instant magic trick. Experience suggests that this good work requires immense patience and perseverance on God's and everyone's part, but, Paul says, it is happening, and it will happen.

One of the big questions that this whole thing raises is – how does change actually happen in us? How does God do it? Many ways, let me mention a few:

First God doesn't fix us from afar, rather, becomes one of us. God takes on all the failed projects of the world upon himself in Jesus, and he heals them in him. It is the recognition that we are in Christ, that frees us to embrace what God is doing in us.

Secondly, unclench our fists. We are loved regardless of how far we get in our own effort. Our part is to receive that gift by faith. And God's love always comes to us on its way to someone else. So God gives us the freedom to let go of trying to control the journey, but, also works with our effort and desire to teach us in success or failure.

Our part as a community is to look around and say, 'Oh, man, we're nowhere close to where we want to be as a church, however, just coming together in faith that God meets us here just as we are, is enough room for the Holy Spirit to generate all kinds of amazing things.

Our hope is also in the beauty of an outcome that is *not* something we can predict. I think with God it is an open future. Sure, the scriptures give us a picture of what a healthy church will look like: producing the fruit of the Spirit, seeing the kingdom come in our neighbourhoods, but the good work will be full of God's enormous creativity in truth, goodness, and beauty.

Our part is to yield in faith – and say, God I trust that you are completing something in me and in us – how do I participate so that your chipping away is less tedious? That new life comes a little bit at a time, blow by blow. One day you realize, did I just do that? Did I just not lash out in anger when I usually do? Did I just give everything I had in my wallet to that aid organization recruiter, instead of the change in my pocket? Where did that come from? It came from God. A little gift. A little prime of the pump. Now, what can we do next? It's not an easy journey, often one step forward two steps back; and it seems like such a long way to go, but it is so worthwhile.

Someone asked me the other day when I was ordained. It was July 1991, almost thirty years ago. I had a lot of optimism that God was going to turn things around in the PCC, but the truth is, we have continued to lose ground as congregations close and number dwindle. Yet, even though I can't see the end, I believe that it is God's mission in which I participate, not my mission that God helps. And for that reason, I am confident that the one who began a good work in us, will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.