

Arise: Partnership

Matthew 28:16-20

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Here's a parable for you: Sam leads a team of around 30 people, most of them bright, enthusiastic, and hardworking. But there is just one problem. Individually everyone is more or less a rockstar at what they do, but as a team, not so much. So Sam decides that a team-building exercise is just what they need.

They all get together in a large room. Sam explains that the game they're going to play has three rounds. In the first round, everyone blows up a balloon, writes their name on it without popping it, and when they've done that, gather outside and await instructions for the second round.

As the second round begins, the participants go back into the room, only to discover that there are twice as many balloons scattered around without names on them. Sam explains that they have 15 minutes to find the balloon with their name written on it. If someone's balloon bursts, they are disqualified. The first three people to find their balloons are the winners. "Ready, set, go!" Sam says, and everyone starts searching for their balloons. Finally, after 15 minutes, Sam stops the round because hardly anyone has found their balloon.

It's now time for the third round. Sam explains that when any team member finds a balloon with someone else's name on it, they give that balloon to the person whose name is on it. "Ready, set, go!" Sam yells, and everyone begins searching, and within a couple of minutes, everyone has their balloon; each person is holding the balloon with their name on it! It's not long before the group of bright, enthusiastic, and hardworking participants understands the point of the parable: Here it is in the t-shirt version: "There's no 'I' in 'Team!'" "Teamwork makes the dream work!" "If you take the 'team' out of teamwork, it's just work. And who wants that?" "We're more together than we are alone."

As it turns out, the Bible also has a few t-shirt versions of this. But we'll come back to that in a moment.

We're in a series that we're calling "Arise!" We're exploring how the power of the resurrection impacts how we think about our life together: Fellowship, Worship, Stewardship, Partnership, and Discipleship. This week we're focusing on Partnership, which is at the heart of our identity as a faith community and expressed in our vision – that Prince of Peace will be known as the connecting church, working collaboratively with schools, churches, local government, campus partners, other organizations, and the business community, providing hope and wholeness to all people, with a specific focus on children, seniors and people in poverty in the south metro area. That's why we've become so strategic about our partnerships with the Salvation Army, Campus Faith Clubs, Second Harvest, other churches – just to name a few, because we know that partnerships are essential; that we're more together than we are apart, we're stronger as a community than we are as individuals.

That is central to the biblical story. From beginning to end, nothing was done without a partnership. From the table of contents through the maps in the back, God calls people into partnering relationships.

For instance, in the book of Genesis, God creates everything and calls everything "good." But when God realizes that Adam is all alone, God says something like, "Wait a minute, it's not good that you're alone. I'll make a companion, a helper, a partner." The writer of Ecclesiastes 4:9 [*The Message*] writes: "It's better to have a partner than go it alone. Share the work, share the wealth." And then this from Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

Fast forward to the 1st century. Central to the mission of Jesus is his commitment to creating partnerships to reveal the kingdom of God – what we could call the Kingdom enterprise. Jesus sends his disciples out in groups. Peter, James, and John partner with Simon, Andrew, and the rest of the disciples. Jesus also partnered with several very influential women for ministry, including Susanna, Mary, called Magdalene, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, who just happened to be King Herod's household manager. Later, the Apostle Paul partnered with Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, John Mark, and Silas to start churches in many places. Partnership is how the Kingdom enterprise got started. And partnership is how the Kingdom enterprise

continues. In Matthew 28:16-20, as the Christian church is birthed, Jesus gathers his disciples together for a bit of team building. He wants them to know that there is no “I” in “Team” and that it is not good that any of them work together. So Jesus commissions them, reminding them that they will never be alone. The Gospel writer gives us the details in Matthew 28:16-20:

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Partnership. Make disciples. Recall God’s promises by celebrating baptisms, teach, and remind one another that Jesus is always present. That seems pretty straightforward. Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy, right? Well, not so fast, it turns out. The tension, of course, is like the tension that Sam felt in the parable I shared with you earlier. People need to be reminded of the power and importance of partnership. We’re more together than we are alone. If Jesus was intentional with his followers about the mission to make disciples of all nations, which he was; the necessity of remembering God’s faithful promises to us in baptism and teaching others about the kingdom of God, which they did; and holding on to the promise that Jesus is with the community of faith every step of the way, which he is, then why is there still so much work to do today? Why isn’t the Kingdom of God more evident in the world today? If we really do have what we need to bring the Kingdom of God into sharper focus in the world today, and if partnership is how the Kingdom enterprise got started, and partnership is how the Kingdom enterprise continues, why is there still tension?

Today, I want to share three of the most common reasons people give for not embracing partnership; three common trends that prevent us from surging forward with our vision to be known as the connecting church that partners with schools, churches, local government, campus partners, other organizations, and the business community to provide hope and

wholeness to all people, with a specific focus on children, seniors and people in poverty in the south metro area. And then give you a couple of steps forward for reversing those trends.

Here’s the first trend that gets in the way of partnership. People will say, *“Partnership isn’t for me; someone else will do it.”* I think you’d be surprised at how common this line of thinking is. And you could swap out just about any expression of ministry for partnership.

“Volunteering isn’t for me; someone else will do it.”

“Stewardship isn’t for me; someone else will do it.”

“Supporting the mission financially, prayerfully, and with my time isn’t for me; someone else will do it.”

And, of course, there are all kinds of alternative versions.

“Vacuuming isn’t for me; someone else will do it.”

“Putting the dishes in the dishwasher or the clothes in the hamper, making the bed isn’t for me; someone else will do it.”

“Letting the dog out isn’t for me; someone else will do it.” I think you get the idea.

So, the bottom line here is this: No one will embrace partnership in the Kingdom enterprise if everyone thinks the partnership is for someone else. If the call to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world is for someone else, then no one will be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Second, people say, *“I can’t be part of the partnership because I’m not trained; I’m not equipped. That’s the pastor’s job; we pay a staff to do the work.”*

Somewhere along the way, the call to collaborative partnerships became compromised by the idea that the call is only for a small, specialized group: the few, the brave, the elite, the trained, the staff, the pastors. Friends, nothing could be further from the truth. The intention was never for only a few to do the work of ministry for the many. To borrow a sports analogy, that would be like – in our case, the Minnesota Vikings players standing on the sidelines watching the coaching staff – including the new coach, Kevin O’Connell, play the game. How crazy would that be? (every metaphor breaks down, I know...)

The Apostle Paul was a champion for equipping the members of the early church community to learn and grow together in the faith. And he did that while sitting in a jail cell in Ephesus. He was their leader, their

teacher, leading, teaching, cheering them on through his letters, his writings while sitting in a Roman prison cell. In Ephesus, the people in the churches were called to come off the bench and get into the game, building the congregation and growing in faith. We might not be here today if they had waited until Paul got out. Paul told his fellow partners that God had equipped all of them with everything they needed. He wrote in Ephesians 4:12 (paraphrased), *"Your responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. Jesus has generously given each one of you supernatural grace... and your calling is to nurture and prepare all the holy believers to do their own works of ministry, and as you do this, you will enlarge and build up the body of Christ."*

You might be wondering, "Who are these people that do this?" It's easy to think that Jesus would choose the most religious people he could find; the high priests, religious lawyers, people born into it, people with political power, or the rich, the famous, people with influence. But the reality is that the people whom Jesus called into partnership were common, ordinary people, even uneducated, poor, uncultured people.

There was certainly PETER. And Jesus would later call him "the rock" of the early church. Then there was MATTHEW, a tax collector who was seen as a traitor, hated by his own family because he was working with the Roman government to collect taxes from the Jewish people. Then there's THOMAS, who questioned everything for all kinds of reasons and trusted nothing unless he could see it or touch it. And JUDAS, who would later betray Jesus by selling him to the Romans for 30 pieces of silver – about \$200.

If Jesus were putting together an NCAA Men's or Women's basketball tournament, his team would be the underdogs. Jesus had first pick, yet rather than choosing the best of the best, Jesus chose the lowest of the low; and this wasn't by accident. Jesus was turning everything upside down and inside out. Jesus didn't choose the elite. He didn't choose the gifted, the cream of the crop, the pick of the litter, the students at the top of their class. Jesus chose very common, ordinary people, people with common, ordinary jobs and from every walk of life to partner with him. And he did so by promising that they would have what they needed to do very uncommon and extraordinary things. Jesus was calling these people into the global partnership of the Kingdom of God. Partnership is how the Kingdom enterprise got started, and partnership is how the Kingdom enterprise continues.

Third, people will say, *"I don't know where to begin."*

Friends, finding your expression in the partnership of the Kingdom enterprise is not complicated. It's not about a technique or methodology or about learning a specific code language or passing a test. What it is, really, is about being you, just as you are, because you have a story, and your story is essential to the partnership of the Kingdom of God. You get to tell your own story. Think about how you came to know the Jesus story and how it's impacted your life. You can share that story with a friend. Invite a friend to share their story with you. Invite someone to worship with you. Pray for a friend, and let them know that you're doing that. Learn along the way. It's not nearly as complicated as you think. It's simply helping someone take the next step into partnership with Jesus.

So, friends, if partnership was how the Kingdom enterprise got started, and if partnership is how the Kingdom enterprise continues, how do we practically lean into that and live into that?

If there are times when you think that partnering in the work of ministry is for someone else, let me encourage you to pray about that. Spend some time meditating on Ephesians 4:12: *"... your calling is to nurture and prepare all the holy believers to do their own works of ministry, and as you do this, you will enlarge and build up the body of Christ."*

Second, if there's a little voice inside that says, "I don't have anything to add to the partnership because I'm not trained or equipped like the staff is," let me just encourage you to think on this: "I have been called, and God is equipping me to do my own works of ministry, and as I do this, I will enlarge and build up the body of Christ."

And third, if you don't know where to begin, if you just don't know what's next, just do this: go to the Connect Desk in the Community Room and talk with someone about your next step. Often the next step is the most important one, but taking that next step is the first step into partnership. And remember: "There's no 'I' in 'Team!'" "Teamwork makes the dream work!" "If you take the 'team' out of teamwork, it's just work. And who wants that?" "We're more together than we are alone."