

Partners in Ministry
Acts 19:1-7 (Acts 18:24-28)
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We had no choice about who our partner would be. I suppose the professor thought she was doing something constructive by shuffling the deck so to speak. Each pair would teach an upcoming section of our doctoral level class on the gospel of Mark. As any of you who have worked on a team know, preparation for co-teaching a class or working on a project with another requires coordinating schedules, sharing the work, and producing a reasonably cohesive product. It is really, really helpful if your partner in such an endeavor has similar inclinations to your own with respect to work schedule and work ethic. A morning person and a night owl are generally not a good match - ditto for the 'get her done early' gal and the 'tackle it with the deadline looming' operative.

Lousialé and I were not a good match. It may have been a cultural difference or it may have been a personality difference. Because I was part of the doctoral program in International Feminist Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary, the cohort group was composed of women from around the world. Lousialé was from Tonga. Now, it the exact location of Tonga does not just pop to mind, don't feel bad. Tonga is one of those small island nations in the South Pacific – one of the places just the other side of the International Dateline. Usually we only hear about places like Tonga at New Year's when they the first to cross into the new year. I'm guessing that that culture of that South Pacific island is much less time-obsessed than our American culture. I'm betting that they are much more laid back, too. Still, Lousialé was a 'tackle it with the deadline looming' person, while, as many of you know, I am very much a 'get her done early' gal. I am bright eyed and bushy tailed in the morning; she was a night owl. The class we were to team-teach was on Monday morning. Lousialé decided to leave the Seminary campus in San Anselmo, California for the weekend and go to visit relatives living in the Napa Valley returning, as she told me, 'some time Sunday evening.'

Our text this morning is from the Acts of the Apostles, a book which tells the story of how the church began. The book recounts the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, some of the obstacles the early preachers and teachers encountered, and some of the struggles among the early Christians including whether pagans had to become Jews before they could become Christians. Our text recounts an exchange Paul had in the city of Ephesus. At the time, Ephesus was a Greek city in Asia Minor on the west coast of what is modern day Turkey. When Paul arrived in the city, he found disciples who believed in Jesus as the Christ, but who were missing some information. They had learned from Apollos, a Jewish-Christian from Alexandria in Egypt. Apollos was a disciple of Jesus who had passed through Ephesus. While there he had preached passionately in the synagogue. But Apollos knew only of the baptism offered by John the Baptist. That Baptism was a Baptism of repentance in anticipation of the coming of Jesus who

would offer the Holy Spirit. By the time Paul was traveling to Ephesus, of course, Jesus was already the risen Lord. Baptism in the Holy Spirit was now available to all. In the text which Kelsey just read, the author tells us that two of Paul's co-workers, a couple named Priscilla and Aquila, had enlightened Apollos himself. Apparently, Apollos' incorrect teaching had remained among some others. Paul offered them the Baptism into the Holy Spirit – the Baptism which we continue to this day.

Priscilla and Aquila were two of Paul's partners in ministry – folks whom Paul had taught, brought to conversion, baptized, and set on the road to ministry. As an aside, though not an unimportant one, we should note that Priscilla was a female partner in ministry. Sometimes we miss that this was not an all-male effort; women too were companions along the way. Paul's leadership was always collaborative. In addition to Priscilla and Aquila, he partnered with Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy. Likely, certainly, in each town where Paul established a Christian community, he also trained disciples who would take the lead; folks who would guide, correct, preach and teach both the community and all newcomers. Paul's ministry stretched from Syria to Italy covering modern day Turkey and Greece along the way. When we consider the great distances which Paul's ministry covered, it is quickly clear that he could never have spread the word as he did without anointing many partners in ministry.

To this day the church, at least in theory, at least in most branches of the church, practices collaborative leadership and ministry as the right order of things. Even the Roman Catholic Church with its clearly hierarchical structures practices a form of collaborative ministry as their leadership gathers in councils to seek the wisdom of the Spirit. Our Presbyterian system, based in the theology of John Calvin and the Reformed Tradition, is strongly rooted in collaborative leadership and ministry as the way that we order our shared life together. We are in good company for Paul was not the only one who practiced collaborative ministry. Jesus himself gathered a team of disciples – twelve to begin with, but then an ever widening circle of disciples who could carry the good news of the gospel well beyond where Jesus himself could realistically go. In taking this team approach Jesus modeled a ministry method for us. He made the call to work together explicit when he said, “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.” That statement is at the heart of our Presbyterian belief in the ability of a group to discern the movement of the Spirit far better than can any of us operating solo.

Of course, this egalitarian approach has its pluses and minuses. Because we so highly prize this ability to work together, we tend to seek out leaders whose primary style of leadership is collaborative. Therefore, as the Pastor Nominating Committee may have noticed as they reviewed resumes, a very high percentage of pastors seeking new churches will list their personal leadership style as ‘collaborative.’ While that makes them more appealing to many churches, it is

not always true. Does that startle you? My guess is that it is not so much that those pastors lie as that they are living with a bit of self-delusion about how they actually operate. We all want to believe that collaboration is our best skill and our strength even if, in truth, we are more the take charge and do it all myself type. Those among us who have lone-ranger tendencies, have a particular challenge. Whether in the work place, in the community or at church, we may need to work a bit harder to appreciate the value in working together. We may need to overcome our frustration with group dynamics or with partners whose methods clash with our comfort zone.

Collaboration is necessary for the tasks of ministry, but it often is far from ideal in practice. When all sides are in tune, when all pull their share, it works well. Unfortunately, real life is messy. I was dismayed to say the least when Lousialé announced that she would be back Sunday night and we could prepare the class then. I am a morning person who fades throughout the day – and I am definitely not a last minute person. My solution, which was definitely not collaborative, was to prepare both pieces of the class myself. When Lousialé showed up at my door at 9 PM on Sunday I simply asked her which piece she'd like to prepare, then I taught the other half. We missed out on what could be the good news about good collaboration – the variety of gifts, skills, and experiences we each brought to the effort. The bad news, of course, about having to share a ministry or teaching or a project with others, is that all any of us have to deal with is flawed human beings – people just like us; people who may skip out on us or do something entirely different than the part of the project they were supposed to do or people who want to pull an all-nighter when we just can't or folks who simply do a lousy job with their part.

Despite all of those down sides, which sometimes seem to outweigh the upsides of working collaboratively, God calls us to work in community. Jesus tells us quite clearly that the work we do is to be gathered work. In truth, we cannot say that there are no lone-wolves in scripture for the prophets sometimes acted as such. That was a part of their call. The call of a prophet is one most of us likely would not want as they often had to run for their lives or act very, very strangely in order to make a point. Prophets may be lone wolves in their unique call. Mostly, though, over and over God calls leaders and followers, disciples, preachers, teachers, and others to work together, to share the teaching and share the ministry. From the get-go Moses had his brother Aaron as his partner in ministry (Exod. 4:10-16). When Moses began to get exhausted by the work of leading, he was advised by his father-in-law, Jethro, to form up a leadership council (Exod. 18:17-27). In the early church when it became known that some of the widows were being neglected, the twelve disciples called together the community (Acts 6). After acknowledging the issue, they noted that their own call was to preach and teach. Then they put together the first Board of Deacons to act together in the ministry of compassion. Notice the layers of collaboration – the twelve decided together what to do. There is no individual named as

generating the idea for Deacons, it came from the group – when two or three or twelve are gathered in the name of Jesus, he is there guiding them. Then they did not name one guy (or gal) to be in charge – they named seven to work together in this ministry of care.

The Spirit of God calls us into community, then calls us to work together in ministry because the job is too big for solo acts. No matter how hard Jessica and I work, it takes each and every one of you participating in ministry to make Northminster the church it is. Not only is the work load too much for one or two or a few, but more gifts and skills are needed than the few can ever provide. The Apostle Paul tells us that the Spirit gives different gifts to different folks and that all are needed. Truer words were never spoken.

Today we ordain and install a new class of Deacons and Elders. Some of you have been down this path before and know what to expect. For others of you this is a new adventure on your faith journey. Thank you for accepting this call. Perhaps it does not feel like a call at the moment. You may even feel that you said, ‘yes’ to a job. Or maybe you said yes because you thought you ‘should’ or even because you have a hard time saying ‘no.’ What I believe with every fiber of my being is that however it feels to you right now, the Spirit of God is woven into the Nominating Committee’s decision to ask you and into your decision to say, “yes” at this time. Your call is individual. The Spirit calls *you*. The Spirit calls you, but you are called into a team – into a collaboration in ministry. The Spirit calls us into community to work in community because the wisdom of the Spirit is offered to the gathered community. The Spirit of God knows far better than any one of us knows that the burden of the ministry – that is, the amount of work to be done – requires a team sharing the work and supporting one another. The Spirit of God calls us into joint ministry because the Spirit knows that deepening relationships are what builds a community. Deepening relationships are what keeps a community vibrant. As many who have served know, doing ministry together is an excellent way to share fellowship, make new friends, and strengthen ties to old friends.

Sisters and brothers, scripture tells us that we are created in the image of God. As Christians we believe that God is within God’s self a trinity of loving community. I believe that we are in the image of God when we too live and minister in loving community. Gathered in the name of Jesus, the Christ, and seeking the wisdom of the Spirit, this community has called Pat, Kim, Bob, Drew, Dave, Meredith, Nan, and Ruth to guide its ministry and Tom, Laurie, Liz, Mavis, Virginia, Kurt, Ned, Rebecca, Terry, Kent, and Tom to share in its ministry of caring and nurture. God calls each of them individually to service. God calls them together as partners in ministry sharing the work and the sacrifice, the warmth and the joy of leadership of Northminster Presbyterian Church. Thanks be to God!