

“How, Then, Shall We Live?”
Philippians 2:1-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12;
Matthew 21:28-31; John 14:12-21

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Pull it together. Have you ever said that to yourself in the midst of a time of stress? Just pull it together! Or maybe you have said it to somebody else. Pull it together. You've got to get your stuff together.

I have certainly been in those places in my life where that has been a thought of mine: I need to pull it together. So I was really struck by The Message translation of Psalm 19, verse 7, which we used in the Call to Worship. It said, “The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together.” I thought that was a wonderful way of thinking about God's revelation—as whole and pulling our lives together. It goes on to say that God points us in the right direction and gives us sign-posts along the way, and God's way is righteous.

In the midst of my feelings in those times when I felt I needed to pull it together, perhaps part of it is remembering what helps pull it together—the revelation of God.

In Philippians that we read today, it talks about how, through Jesus Christ, there is encouragement, consolation, sharing in the Spirit, compassion, and sympathy. If you have experienced any of these—and of course, you have—if you have encountered Christ, you know that Christ gives us encouragement, consolation, sharing in the Spirit, compassion, and sympathy. All these are things that God gives us. I don't think God gives these to us simply so we can luxuriate in them. There is a sense that when we've encountered God and have received these things, there's a next step. In fact, that is what is being said in Philippians. If there's all this stuff, then, it says, “Make my joy complete.” love one another. The idea is that God has given us all this stuff so that we can do something. We can use our abilities to do something.

Throughout these past four weeks, I've been looking at various parts of that passage where it says to love the Lord with your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Today, we are looking at strength. When we are given all this direction, when we are given all these things—the consolation, the sympathy—there's a next step. We can *do* something. It's interesting that one of the things that is noted about what we can do in loving God is to use our strength. We have a capability. We can do something. We have strength. Sometimes it feels like if I become a Christian then all the strength is in God, and yet God is here saying, “Use your strength.”

Another way I think about it is the word *agency*, which means that we have the ability to make decisions and act on them, and that what happens is important. We make decisions every day. We act upon those decisions every day. I think that in total, all those decisions are important. They make the world we live in. Sometimes we recognize that there are particular decisions that may have really important consequences that we don't even know. The idea is that we have agency. We have the ability to make decisions.

That idea that our decisions matter reminded me of a story that I heard in childhood. Maybe some of you have read “Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates,” or have read those stories to a child at some time. In that, there’s a story about a young Dutch boy who puts his finger in the dike because there was a leak. The idea is that he stands there all night with his finger in the dike until morning when some people from the town come and recognize what he has done, and they fix the leak. What was that about? What would have happened had he not put his finger in the hole? The idea is that the hole would get bigger and bigger, and that based on that initial small leak, the whole dike would have eventually collapsed. So a little thing like putting his finger in the hole saves the whole community. It is a reminder that sometimes a little thing, a little action, can be very important.

It also brought to my mind an episode of Star Trek. It was one of those where they go way back in time and Captain Kirk, as he always does, falls in love with someone. The problem is that it’s just before WWII, and she’s leading a peace movement and he saves her. Then their whole history changes. So they have to go back in time again to keep him from saving her. But the point is that one small act can change the world.

In the Matthew passage, Jesus is suggesting it’s not just that we have the ability, but we’re invited into the vineyard to use it. The passage indicates it’s better to say no and then go ahead and do something than to say OK, I’ll do it and then not do it, which is much easier. But the point is to work in the vineyard, to use one’s strength in service to God with God’s people.

Jesus is inviting us to use our agency, to work in the vineyard. If you look at the John passage, he even suggests that if we’re working in the vineyard we can do things greater than what he’s done. Now, I do not understand exactly what that means, but it sounds pretty incredible. Maybe it goes back to what I said earlier, that we can do things that we don’t even know we have done that will change history. Perhaps it’s not as dramatic as saving somebody’s life. Maybe it’s just showing love to someone in the right circumstance that can change the way history goes.

It feels to me like that’s the case. God has given us this incredible agency, this strength, this ability to make decisions and to live and to know that those decisions matter. But it takes me back to where I started the sermon because once I begin to recognize that my decisions really matter, I begin to think, “How do I pull it all together?” How do I make the next decision? How do I pull it all off?

One of the things I begin to realize is that when I try to do all that, I start to wonder if it’s not all about me. You see, I think the thing that Jesus says to his disciples is, “I won’t leave you orphaned.” He invites them to know the fellowship of the Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the one that can show us what’s real. So it is at those moments that I’ve got to remember that line from the Psalm. God’s revelation is whole and it pulls us together.

I would say that really works in two ways. It pulls us together, literally, as a group. It pulls us together into a community. It talks in the scripture about the fellowship of the Spirit. We're in a fellowship. If we look at those descriptions in Philippians, a fellowship offers encouragement. It offers consolation, sharing in the Spirit, compassion, and sympathy. It feels to me like what he says is that as we join in the fellowship of the Spirit, are given some room to think, and know we're cared for, it gives us encouragement for the decisions we need to make.

There's a second piece to that, however. It talks about not thinking just about ourselves, but thinking about the interests of others. Sometimes I wonder if, when I'm trying to pull it all together, if what I'm not really trying to pull together is just my life. I can begin to get so focused on myself that I lose track of the decisions, the guidance that God has given me to love one another. God pulls it all together. I can make those steps in caring for and loving others and I don't have to make the whole world work. I can do what I can do. I can do my part. It is, in fact, when we do that we create the fellowship of the Spirit. We create our time together, a community of faith where each one is important. Each one has an agency, a strength, a capability, and it is as we're in the fellowship of the Spirit, as we allow the revelation of God to pull things together that we don't end up in that desperate place of "I've got to pull it all together." I can do my part. I can hear how God leads me and leads us and in the love and grace we have for one another, it takes away that desperation.

It's clearly an invitation to use our strength, but to do so under God's guidance, to know the Spirit is with us, that Jesus leads us and that we'll have the fellowship of the Spirit to encourage us. We are invited to use our strength to love God and to love neighbors. That's the message. We have a capability to use our strength as we follow Christ and use it according to God's leading. We can use our agency to extend the work of Christ. We can love one another, living in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and we can recognize the benediction that comes from 2 Corinthians 13, verse 13:

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

Amen.