

“Teamwork”

a sermon on Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

by Nancy Raca, Covenant United Methodist Church, July 3, 2016

Is anyone here part of a team?

What kind? What’s your role? What’s the best thing about being on a team? What makes a team work?

I would guess that everyone here, at one point or another, has been part of a team.

Whether it’s a sports team, work team, marriage, or a school project, most of us have had to work with others at some time in our lives.

We’ve seen greatness in teams in sports and entertainment: the 1985 Chicago Bears, the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, Abbott and Costello, the Avengers. We know that winning teams emphasize teamwork over individualism, sharing the glory and the responsibility.

But then there are times when we have to go it alone: as a single parent, or an only child, a solo sports player, or a specialty job. This can be rewarding, but it can also be hard, even if you’re a very independent person or someone who really enjoys being alone. Bearing a weight all by yourself gets tiring.

And yet, in our culture, our historic American ideal is one of independence and individualism. Our forefathers, who brought our country into existence 240 years ago tomorrow, are shrouded in the mystique of the independent rebel, fighting for freedom from oppression. The 4th of July is based on the notion that we are better off alone, without interference from other powers. We see that played out today in a

resurgence of American nationalism but also around the world. The decision of Great Britain to leave the European Union, for example. The idea that we are better off on our own. We live in a culture that tells us to look out for number one, that “you only live once,” and that “the one who dies with the most toys wins.”

Yet the individualism we celebrate in our culture is as much a myth as our belief that we are invincible. The pilgrims and pioneers who settled our country knew that their survival depended on each other. Our original colonies were called “commonwealths,” places where the good of any one person was linked to the good of all. And as Benjamin Franklin said at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, “We must hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately.”

As much as I pride myself on my independence and individuality, I have myself realized the value of teamwork. I was on a sports team in high school for a while – soccer – but that wasn’t really the best example. Mostly I was afraid of the ball, so I probably did more to drag that team down than to contribute to any of our few wins.

But since then I’ve been part of some very successful teams. For me, a successful team is one in which the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. It’s when you achieve *synergy* – outcomes that are not possible by individuals but only by individuals working *together*.

The most important team in my life is my marriage with my husband Paul. I am better because I am with him. I reach farther and try harder because of him, but I

also rest easier and enjoy life more because of him. Most of the time, we achieve a kind of synergy – the kind that comes from working as a team for the past 22 years.

But more recently, I've come to know the joy of being part of a new team. Just one year ago this weekend, I started here at Covenant as the Pastor for Creative Ministries. Most of you know that this is my first call as a pastor. It's been an awesome year getting to know you and being part of the Covenant team, part of the Covenant family. But one of the most valuable experiences this year – for me and I hope for the church – has been the opportunity to work side by side with Pastor Ann.

Pastor Ann and I are very different from each other. She is careful where I am impulsive. She is quiet where I am loud. She is traditional where I am itching for something new. She is experienced where I am a novice.

We do not always see eye to eye. You might think, by looking at our personality profiles, that we would not do well together. But you would be wrong.

I believe that God called me here because God knew that synergy could develop between me and Pastor Ann. I believe God knew that, working with Ann, I could achieve more than I could alone. I think God knew that the work of bringing about God's kingdom, the work of spreading the Gospel, of ordering the life of the church is best done in teams.

Because God believes in teams.

I know this because Scripture shows it to be true. What's the first thing Jesus did when he started his ministry? He formed a team. 12 disciples. And in today's Scripture, when Jesus sent people out ahead of him to proclaim the kingdom of God, he sent them out in teams of two. Jesus sends people out two-by-two, and they come back joyous, exclaiming that even demons submit to them. God's gift here, I believe, is not that these people can heal and cast out demons, but that they have the opportunity to learn what can happen when they work *together*. Synergy.

Imagine what it would have been like if you were one of those going out on behalf of Jesus. Jesus wants to free the oppressed, heal the outcasts, welcome the marginalized, and declare the power of God in a time when Caesar is worshipped as Lord. So when you go out to share this message, you are going to meet some resistance.

You are heading out with basically only the clothes on your back – no money, no luggage, not even any shoes. No comfortable Holiday Inns for you. No fine dining, and no extra change of socks. Things are going to be tough.

But at least you have a buddy! A teammate! When one of you falters, the other keeps you going. When one gets lost, the other finds the way. When one is discouraged, the other can keep the faith for both for a while. That's what the company of believers does – we hold on to each other, console each other, encourage each other, and even believe for each other. God's work – and, remember, everything we do is God's work – is not meant to be done alone but in *community*. God does not want us to go out alone, because God knows that we are stronger when we are together.

It's a sad thing that most United Methodist churches today can't afford more than one pastor.

Pastor Ann says that the best thing about our partnership is getting a refreshing perspective. When you work alone, she says, you don't always see the possibilities.

That's true. For me, the most amazing moments in my partnership with Pastor Ann are those times of stunned silence, when we just look at each other and go, "Huh! I never thought of it that way." It's that give and take, that sharing, that cooperating that leads to new ways of thinking for each of us and, I believe, more thoughtful pastoral care, and better preaching, and new opportunities for all of us at Covenant.

Ann says that having a partner opens us up to new ideas, new possibilities, new ways of thinking. And that's the Good News. Even if we sometimes feel like we are on our own in this world, like we don't have a partner to rely on or a team to fall back on, we have God's promise that we are *not* alone. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are present with us *always*. Jesus, Emmanuel, means *God with us*. We are on God's team! God has chosen *us*.

Accepting God as our partner opens us up to new perspectives, new truths, new possibilities. When we forget to work with Jesus, to consult him and listen to him, we are missing out on the benefits of being on the greatest team this world has ever known.

I am working every day to be a better wife, mother, friend, and daughter. I am working every day to be a better pastor, a more authentic Christian, a more faithful child of God. I am doing that by being in community with my family, my co-workers, and all of you, but mostly by being in partnership with God.

Whatever it is you're working on – and we are ALL working on something – you don't have to go it alone. God walks with you. God *carries* you. God has chosen you and called you by name for *God's team*.

Thanks be to God!

Gracious God, we have stood on the sidelines, wondering if we will ever be picked for a team. We have waited – to be wanted, to be valued, to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

And then you called us, Lord. You chose us to be part of your team. You pointed at us, called us by name, and said, “I want you.”

Thank you. Thank you for believing in us. Thank you for giving us the chance to bring about your kingdom here. Help us to create synergy with each other. Show us how working together makes us stronger than going it alone.

Lord, on this Independence Day weekend, we thank you for our freedoms. We thank you for the blessings you have bestowed on this great nation. Help us to use your gifts wisely! Remind us that the United States was founded to give hope to the oppressed, to welcome the outcast, to provide new opportunities. Let us live into the vision of a just society.

Bless our leaders, our servicemen and women, our citizens and our immigrants.

Bless our fellow Americans whose lives have been devastated by natural disaster, from the flooding in West Virginia to the wildfires in California.

We lift up to you today Pastor Ann in her travels, and all those listed on our prayer page. Hear, Lord, not only those prayers spoken aloud, but those prayers kept deep in our hearts, for which we have no words.

We ask all of this in the name of the one who calls us and sends us, your son Jesus Christ. Amen.