

Advent Lutheran Church
Partners in Faith
August 10, 2025
Philippians 1:1-18a & John 15:12-17

Everywhere we turn everyone is getting ready for a new school year! This weekend the entire state of Texas is celebrating tax free weekend. Here at Advent our worship service featured the blessing of the backpacks while conversations about the first day of school abound.

With so much focus on back to school, we can't help but recall some of our own school experiences. I've had lots and lots of first day experiences. All of the years in elementary school, junior high and high school, then four more for college, three more for seminary, and another three for a doctoral degree. Surely, after this much experience I had the school thing figured out.

And I really thought I did, until I went back to school as an older adult ten years after finishing my doctoral degree. After a lifetime of studying liberal arts and theology, I entered business school. While the classrooms looked the same, the experience could not have been more different.

Siblings in Christ, these folks introduced me to something called group projects. While I had a small taste of that in prior experiences, it was central in my MBA coursework. Nearly every class had a major group project.

I never knew who my partners would be. And once I met them, I was often still unclear if they were committed to do everything necessary to ensure the success of the group as a whole. This challenge was compounded by the fact that everyone in the program was an adult with a demanding full-time job with many frequently traveling across multiple time zones.

If you want to hear some of the more frustrating stories, find me after worship or during the week. For now, I'll simply say I learned a lot about being a good partner and about creating an environment in which a diverse group of people who likely

otherwise would have never crossed paths could become a high performing team.

Then, just as I was beginning to learn to really trust my project partners, I reached the end of the program. Our final class – a capstone experience – required us to create a comprehensive business plan for a business that someone was interested in launching. This meant the intensity and stakes of the partnership increased exponentially.

For me, the stakes rose higher still when my group opted to create a business plan for the ministry I was serving at the time, which is now known as the Mansfield Mission Center. It took us longer than was ideal to learn to effectively blend our varied backgrounds and areas of expertise. Over the course of a semester, each of us invested more of ourselves than we imagined possible. We learned. We stretched. We persevered.

Finally, we submitted a 134-page business plan to the professor. Then we presented the highlights of our work to our classmates. While the entire group was anxious to receive a good grade in order to finish their MBA experience and graduate, I was more focused on the plan itself.

For me, the plan was much more than an academic exercise. It was a way to ensure the Mansfield Mission Center would have the financial resources to serve more neighbors in need with food, clothing, employment services, and healthcare.

To this day, I'm thankful to my partners: the women who shared their years of professional experience in finance, marketing, IT, and strategy. Because of them, the framework for growth was strong. The Mansfield Mission Center Thrift Store now generates over \$1 million a year in sales. At around 50% profit, that means \$500,000 a year is available to help those in need in Mansfield and South Arlington.

I've been talking about business school and a faith-based non-profit, but have yet to say a word about Scripture. Or, maybe,

I've said a great deal about this morning's Epistle reading in a way that models the greatest storyteller of all.

Remember, we spent the entire summer hearing some of Jesus lesser-known stories and being reminded that one of the reasons his messages are memorable is that he used imagery that was familiar to his original audience.

I'm certainly not Jesus, but I'm interested in following him. And so was Paul. The same Paul who wrote Philippians from a jail cell. A letter we know today as the epistle of joy. And, in the opening verses of the first chapter we learn that his joy comes from one simple yet profound truth: they are partners in the gospel.

If you think I was assigned some partners in business school that I would never have chosen if given the opportunity just wait until you see how the church works. God brings people together to partner for the gospel that none of us would group together. This was true for the church at Philippi and it is true for the church we call Advent.

Paul's vision of partnership isn't based on productivity or programs. Paul doesn't provide a list of key performance indicators. Instead, Paul understands partnership in relational terms. He views it as mutual love and support that flow from a shared commitment to Christ.

This connects us with our Gospel reading. In John 15, Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants . . . I have called you friends."

This is an extraordinary truth. It is one we must not gloss over. Jesus, the one in whose name we are gathered this day, invites relationship. Jesus intends friendship. Jesus insists on partnership.

And what defines this partnership? Love.

"This is my commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus is talking about a love that is powerful and that can change everything. He's describing a sacrificial love that is intended to shape how we live, how we serve, and how we build community.

And it's the same love Paul has for the Philippians. Through this love we become partners with Christ and partners with one another for the sake of the gospel.

In just a moment we will sing a hymn that effectively communicates this message. It begins

Called as partners in Christ's service
Called to ministries of grace
We respond with deep commitment
Fresh new lines of faith to trace.'

May we learn the art of sharing
Side by side and friend with friend
Equal partners in our caring
To fulfill God's chosen end.¹

The hymn, like today's message, reminds us that being church isn't a spectator sport. As attractive as it may sound, we are not called to be passive recipients of religious goods and services.

We are called to be partners in Christ's service. All of us are called, not just pastors or council members or those who lead ministries. The whole church is called to be a partner in Christ's service.

And, in back-to-school language, you might say we've been assigned to a group project called Advent Lutheran Church.

May we all live into this calling.

Amen.

¹ Jane Parker Huber, "Called as Partners in Christ's Service", text © 1981 by Jane Parker Huber (admin. Westminster John Knox Press); tune by John Zundel, 1870, hymn.