

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 31, 2021.

Luke 24: 45-50 (NIV)

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” ⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.

2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2 (NIV)

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s *ambassadors*, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. **6** As God’s *co-workers* we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. ² For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.”¹ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.²

Sermon: Partnering with God

One of the traditional themes in the Liturgical calendar at this time of year is Jesus’ calling of the disciples to follow him. In Mark’s gospel, for example, Jesus calls Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew, who were both fishermen, saying “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”³ A Rabbi’s disciples were his closest apprentices and were being trained-on-the-job to follow in their master’s footsteps. Fast forward in time and John’s gospel presents a long discourse of Jesus to his disciples just prior to his crucifixion. There he effectively tells his disciples that they have “graduated,” they are no longer servants and he calls them his “*friends*.”⁴ Later, in a post-resurrection appearance to his followers, Luke tells us Jesus again joins the dots for them of his own suffering with that of the suffering Messiah in the Old Testament scriptures. And then he *commissions* them to spread his good news message of

¹ Isaiah 49:8.

² See also 1 Cor 3:5-11.

³ Mark 1:17.

⁴ John 15:15.

“repentance for the forgiveness of sins” to all nations.⁵ The disciples graduated to become Christ’s *co-workers*. Paul saw himself in the same way, as we heard in our second reading. He uses words like God’s *ambassadors* or *fellow workers*. Today I want to first link the theme of “partnering with God” to the *trust* God has in us that I mentioned last week.⁶ Then I want to focus on some of the positive, practical implications of what that means.

In the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, God shares his power with his creatures and *entrusts* humankind with the responsible role of caring for creation as a gardener or as a shepherd. When we fail in that role it brings great sadness to God, for we demonstrate that we are not trustworthy stewards, harming creation, the context of life itself.⁷ In the Parable of the Talents, you will recall that the master *entrusts* three servants with different amounts of money.⁸ Two demonstrate their trustworthiness and through their hard work they double the master’s investment. The last servant did not risk because he did not *trust* the master; he only *feared* him. What is implied in both these accounts is that God is *not* a micromanager but *delegates* tasks and responsibilities to his followers. God *shares* his creative power with us and trusts us to use our capabilities wisely. God invites us to be co-creators and partners in his Kingdom.⁹ Yes, this is *risky* for God, as the parable implies, but as mentioned last week, such *trust* arises out of God’s *love*.

Someone might say, “How can this possibly be *risky* for God; after all, he *knows* the future?” That is a great question! My response is to say we need to be mindful what we assume about God’s relationship with time.¹⁰ That’s too complex a topic for a sermon but, amongst other things, it depends on what we hold to be our primary *metaphor* for God. Last week I mentioned “God as *friend*.” Perhaps we are more familiar with the image of “God as *King*.” This was understandably a common metaphor in the Old Testament, given their system of government. God as ultimate King tends to imply that he has *total* sovereignty over humanity. Yes, he has a *relationship* with his people, but it’s hardly a partnership. We are subjects who *must* serve and obey. It is this image of absolute power that links to the idea that God takes no risks and that the future is completely mapped out.¹¹ However, there are many other metaphors for God in the Bible, including “God as *Father*.” It is this parental image that is loving,

⁵ Luke 24:45-50; Matt 28:18-20; John 20:21-23. But first they need their own anointing of the Holy Spirit, and Luke details that empowering in Acts 2, and the rest of that book outlines the spread to the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

⁶ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/God-is-Love-and-Love-Trusts-2.pdf>. See also Wm. Curtis Holtzen, *The God Who Trusts* (IVP, 2019).

⁷ The OT prophets also spoke against Israel’s kings for failing to be shepherds of God’s people and to instigate social justice. In 1 Sam 15:11 we read that “God regrets making Saul king.” Why? Because God realizes that he could no longer *trust* Saul.

⁸ See Matt 25:14-30; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-Generous-Master-and-the-Fearful-Servant.pdf>.

⁹ In Gal 2:7 Paul says that he has been *entrusted* with the gospel for non-Jews.

¹⁰ God being “outside” of time, as often assumed, is – I suggest – based on Greek thinking rather than Hebrew. See also Reddish, *Science and Christianity* (Wipf & Stock, 2016), chapter 6.

¹¹ Another metaphor is “God as *judge*.” The biblical idea of a judge is *not* that they are *over* the people but *for* the people. A judge seeks to restore and to save. God as judge is *relational* and *compassionate*, rather than cool and detached and unaffected by the “courtroom drama.” The end of the day, God as judge is trying to address the *relationship* which is at stake, rather than enforcing a set of rules or the details of the contract.

nurturing, and *changes with time* as the child matures.¹² This relationship between parent and child is dynamic, requiring mutual trust if the relationship is to continue to develop beyond childhood.¹³ We will never stop being God’s children, but God desires we mature from our childishness into *partners* God can trust with the “family business,” so to speak.¹⁴ Kingly power, dominance, and coercion can possibly bring order or obedience, but can never foster communion, and certainly not the mutual love that God desires. Partnership is therefore *not* possible without self-limitation and, consequently, the God’s power is necessarily restrained, shared, or in some cases given-up, in order develop loving relationships that are built upon mutual trust.¹⁵ By sharing power, God can do *more* than act; he can *interact*. God is given up absolute control but gets something better in return – *faith* and *love*.¹⁶

Taking this divine partnership seriously results, then, in a different – and a more dynamic - way of living our calling. If God is engaged with time, then history is *real*; it is a genuine reciprocal journey of mutual discovery for both ourselves *and* God. He elicits our input into history; we are junior partners with God being the senior partner. This means without our contributing, things will not get done that ought to get done! We creatures therefore have a vital role in history; it is a weighty responsibility as illustrated above in the Parable of Talents. What, then, are some of the positive, practical implications of authentic partnership with God? Here are eight characteristics, all beginning with the letter “*R*,” that I suggest apply to both individuals and the Church.¹⁷ See what you think

1. Responsibility – This means taking our divine calling seriously. We are made in the image of God and hence we have a divine purpose. That purpose is first to care responsibly for creation as God’s agents, as co-gardeners and as co-shepherds. We are also called to lead with integrity on God’s behalf, enacting justice and compassion. In addition, Jesus’ Great Commission calls us to be God’s ambassadors, proclaiming and living out the upside-down values of God’s reign as portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount. Taken all-together, we are to humbly and responsibly *own our calling* as divine image-bearers to God’s world.

2. Relationship – Partnership with God also means being in relationship with all humankind - for we are *all* made in God’s image. But we are to especially be in relationship with those who take their divine

¹² The child’s relationship to the parent grows from a simple dependence and obedience into a relationship of mindful honoring and mutual caring. Whereas the parent once acted *for* the child, the parent now acts *with* the child in order to foster growth and bring maturity – and also for the good of the relationship itself.

¹³ I believe this relational aspect is *authentic*, hence God is engaged *in* time, rather than exclusively outside of it.

¹⁴ In other words, God trusts the Church with his kingdom mission. Those today with family businesses will better grasp this image. Moreover, this connection would work well in the ancient world as (inherited) family businesses were common.

¹⁵ *Partnership* also means that neither party is totally free but will be dependent on the other. Love shares its power; it is also a power that is *for* others, not *over* others – it *enables* them. (See the creation accounts in this light.)

¹⁶ And this is embodied in *covenant*. Moreover, in this partnership scenario, the future is not fixed for God (or creation) in the way that many traditionally assumed that it is. Trusting by definition has an element of *hope* about it, which implies some lack of certainty as to future events. God delegates responsibilities and capabilities, and takes that act of entrustment seriously. That means he does not try to take control of the steering wheel as we run into the ditch! God deals with *what is*, with the *consequences* of human action, yet always working to bring good out of evil and working towards his ultimate goals.

¹⁷ This “8 Rs” is part of a forthcoming essay in a new book on “*Partnering with God*,” (SacraSage, 2021).

calling seriously. We are therefore to be active members of a praying, loving, and serving community. The early church in Acts was known for their mutual devotion, radical lifestyle, social justice, and commitment to God. This echoes the restorative principle of Jubilee from Isaiah that Luke uses to define the ministry of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth.¹⁸

3. Reflection – We need not continually re-invent the wheel. Instead, we are to *learn from others* through soul-searching reflection. This entails studying and valuing the scriptures, for through them our faith community believes God has spoken – and when God speaks, things happen! It also means learning from history, for God’s Spirit continues to inspire the faithful in every generation; we recognize this in the reformers - both historical and contemporary.¹⁹ Sometimes we need to rediscover the buried treasures of history’s wisdom; not everything needs to be “novel”! Upon reflection and meditation, we can - through partnering with God *and with others* - discern what divine words we need to hear and proclaim and enact today.

4. Risk-taking – Things that should happen will not happen unless we act *boldly*, and this calls for *courage*. Partnering with God is, then, a call to experiment! I suggest that sometimes we fail to act out of fear of failure, or because we are anxious of public humiliation. If the outcome only depended on ourselves, we might have legitimate grounds for such apprehension; but isn’t that underestimating our partnership with God and with others? Even so, not all experiments will result in the outcome we originally envisaged. “Failure” is possible! Nevertheless, there is always the potential to learn something new and worthwhile along the way. Taking risks, however, does *not* mean being reckless and then expecting God to bail us out. That is why risk-taking requires wisdom and discernment - along with courage. I therefore believe risks can be worth taking, and without risk-taking we will never have the opportunity to learn something new.

5. Redundancy - Activities happen for a certain time and place. I suggest we can be too focused on legacy and reputation - and that may be an unhealthy factor in our reluctance to take risks. Letting go of legacy and crippling traditions can be liberating!²⁰ Our journey is primarily one of *faithfulness*, partnering with a promise-keeping God who is steadfast and trustworthy. In light of the biblical metaphor of “new wine and old wineskins,” we can be assured God’s Spirit will always find a new way!

¹⁸ See Luke 4:16-21. This is, without doubt, a high and challenging calling, one that can only be partially realized in continual partnership with the Spirit and through persistent prayer. [“Partially” is because this can never be complete before the eschaton.] Prayer - too complex a topic to consider here - is more potent than we are inclined to think, for through prayer we deliberately engage with an active and present God.

See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Prayer-In-An-Open-World.pdf> .

¹⁹ This requires us to become thoughtful, amateur theologians who reflect on the writings of various scholars. And we can also be encouraged by accounts of God’s presence and actions as experienced by witnesses in all ages and places.

²⁰ By redefining “success” we can appreciate the merits of obsolescence rather than permanency. Not everything needs to last forever; we are promised the universal Church will, but that doesn’t apply to every individual congregation - or even every denomination.

6. Relaxation – *Resting* in God’s steadfastness leads to *peace*, instead of fear or paralysis. This relaxation is based on our confidence of God’s good character. In the process, we acknowledge our finiteness and hence our dependency on the Trinity. Relaxing is not the same as being passive – it is both a vibrant, trusting faith and faith in action! Moreover, whatever risks we have taken in humble partnership with God - whether we deem the outcomes to be successful or not - are to be considered as “harvest” because God was *also* at work.²¹ In our results-orientated culture, let us take this message to heart. God is always working behind the scenes to bring good out of evil, yet the Senior Partner invites our help because our contribution needed. If God delegates power and authority, as the Bible indicates, then our cooperation is necessary. God evidently *trusts* his partners!

7. Re-evaluation and (8.) Renewal - If the *journey* itself is important, and not merely the destination, then we need start the cycle again (in other words, return to **Responsibility**) and review both the *progress* and the *partnership*. This provides us with a further basis for the persistent Christian hope.

These suggested “Eight Rs” are presented as a constructive way to implement the notion of “partnering with God.” They are intended to be practical and pastoral, yet without being too prescriptive.²²

I want to conclude today with a modern metaphor for God, that of “God as the jazz band leader.”²³ In this image, both human and divine actions are in concert with one another. Yes, God exhibits power and responsibility in leading the band. And God cares deeply about the music being played *and* the musicians playing, as he guides the band both as a whole *and* individually. God is *not*, however, a conductor of an orchestra leading each member to play the notes as composed. *God wants jazz!* And for this, God must allow each musician to play his or her *own* notes. God leads and enables, even *encourages*, improvisations. Moreover, God is not indifferent to *what* music is played; he desires things of beauty, love, peace, and wholeness, yet he enjoys *our* creativity based upon those themes. This metaphor wonderfully depicts a God *of trust* who invites *us* to be part of his band, to play our part with great freedom and creativity. In the process, God trusts us *not* to ignore our unique contributions, nor to get carried away with our own powers and capabilities. Nevertheless, this image gives us a vision of God who leads us in that creative process and yet trusts us to make our own music - and to thrill and surprise God with our improvisations, without detracting from the song itself. God has entrusted us to follow the divinely crafted melody but with our own creativity. In short, God not only enjoys our company, but has trusted us to do what is beautiful, lovely, and right *in concert* with God. God has not only *empowered* us to be other *than* God, he has *entrusted* us to be other *with* God. Let us therefore *trust* and *partner* with *this* God, and live up to our Spirit-empowered calling! Amen.

²¹ Recall too that in the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:1-9; 18-23) there were various degrees of harvest productivity.

²² Note, the list is not exhaustive. Nor is this catalogue to be seen as a fixed sequence or as a repetitive, circular/spiral loop. Certain “R’s” can happen in parallel, and some may be in tension with others. This list simply serves as a starting point for an on-going conversation within a church - or for an individual - as we grapple together with the radical and revolutionary idea of an authentic, meaningful partnership with God.

²³ This metaphor, like all images has limits!