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Partners Together For God¹

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Text: Exodus 19:2–8a (A—Pentecost 4)

¹ “Partners Together For God!” *We know about partnership don’t we?*

Some years ago in my hometown of Laird, Saskatchewan, a farmer took ill at seeding time, and died. A couple of phone calls brought tractors and seeders and trucks and before you could say “Bob’s your uncle” his widow’s crops were in! That’s partnership.

We in Canada know a great deal about partnership. Stuart McLean, a veteran of the CBC and perhaps best known for his appearances with Peter Gzowski on “Morningside”, picked out seven small towns across Canada and spent several weeks in each. Reading his account of this odyssey, entitled *Welcome Home*,² I was struck again and again how much the folks in these places know about partnership. In Ferryland, Newfoundland he learned that “virtually no one in town has a mortgage. When you turn twenty you buy a lot from a relative for a dollar. Then you spend the next four years building a bungalow in your spare time. Your friends and neighbours help. For a town where the resale value of a home is inevitably below the construction costs, there are an unreasonable number of new homes” (386).

They know about partnership out East.

In Nakusp, British Columbia, he met Edith in The Village Bread and Pastry Shop. She’d been born in Germany, her husband, Nick, in Yugoslavia. She told about when her husband got sick. “He had cancer. He was very ill. He was in hospital and I was left to keep the shop going. Well, sometimes the

pastries weren't what they should be. I had never done pastry before. But people came in and took them and never said anything. They waited until he came back. When he came back he was bald from the treatment. He looked awful. But the only thing people said was, 'You're looking great.' They bought the things he was making. It did a lot for him. It was very important for his recovery. Remember, we were new to town when that happened. Do you understand what I am telling you?"(370).

Yes! Yes! We understand! They know about partnership in Nakusp.

And so it went from one end of Canada to the next. In each place: tales of partnership. Ah, but you know that! You know! Tales of partnership. You're thinking of your own experiences of partnership right now.

We know about partnership!

2 We know something else about partnership. It has a dark side to it.

In St-Jean-de-Matha McLean learned of an ecological action group who discovered a silent and hidden partnership that allowed garbage from Montreal and Ottawa to be dumped at St-Jean. They rented an airplane to fly over the dump and discovered "six pools of black sludge the size of six hockey rinks. It was raw sewage. All of it was uncovered"(154). They had to use the Freedom of Information Act three times to get information from the ministry of the environment (155). There was a partnership of greed and connivance kept hidden.

In Dresden, Ontario, a place long celebrated as the end of the famous "underground railroad" that brought fleeing black slaves to freedom in Canada, McLean found a long and sad history of festering racial discrimination. Oh, you could never prove it. It was never, or rarely, clear out in the open. There was a partnership in discrimination, and a partnership in keeping it hidden.

When we're honest, we admit the dark side of partnership, too. And the worst of that dark partnership is that we cooperate in keeping it hidden. Because we're either afraid, or greedy.

We know about partnership. We know the good, decent, bright partnerships of which we're proud. We know the hidden,

dark, conniving partnerships about which we keep an uneasy and guilty silence.

³ *Well, then. Because we know so much about partnership among ourselves in our communities and congregations: partnership for the sake of mutual helpfulness, for money-making, for protection, for friendship, for care, for play, for worship, we also already know a great deal about partnership together for God! Partnership together for God is summed up in this word from the Lord: "... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).*

That's what it is to be partners together for God!

⁴ Notice this, right off the top: *Partnership for God is a communal reality.*

Of course, you say. Partnership can't be had any other way! But listen nevertheless. This word is addressed not to individuals but to a community: "a priestly kingdom", "a holy nation".

This is enormously important. God is talking to a community, not to privatistic individuals. God sees a *people*, a *community* out there, not solitary little holy Joes and Holy Joans. Do you hear that?

One of our Seminary students recalled that when he was a teenager he had this dream of becoming a hermit living in a solitary cabin in the woods. The wise mother of a friend told him, "You can't be a Christian all by yourself." He argued that his relationship with God didn't involve anyone except himself and God. She told him that was simply not true, and one of the things that brought him eventually to the Seminary was the growing realization that being a Christian means being a member of the community of Christ, a member of what St. Paul called the body of Christ.³

We need to learn this afresh. One of the curses of our times is our extreme focus on the individual. People get mad when they don't get their own way. People mount campaigns against their pastors when things aren't done the way they think they ought to be done, or leave congregations in a huff, or divide parishes. People pull out of negotiations and cooperative planning if things don't go their way. Not only get mad, but

get violent and make threatening phone calls or get guns and shoot. Our extreme individualism is a disease.

Not so in my Kingdom, says God. You are a priestly people, a holy nation. You are a body of believers, a redeemed and redeeming community. If you want to be partners, you have to be partners *together*! That takes a lot of loving and forgiving and forbearing and a lot of mutual bearing of burdens. You're partners *together* or not at all. Christ cannot be divided up into squabbling factions and individual shouting voices, St. Paul told the Corinthians. Let's have sound discussion and sturdy debate, but none of this taking your marbles and going home in a huff.

You shall be a priestly *people*, a holy *nation*. Otherwise we'll slide off into the dark side of partnership.

⁵ *Next, notice that this partnership together for God is a priestly partnership.*

Think of the bright, decent, good, helpful, noble partnerships you've experienced and been proudly part of. Let's take that and deepen it: can you be a witness and testify to the world that God is present there in those partnerships? That's priestly!

A priest is one who localizes the presence of God. It's all well and good to say, "God is everywhere," but it's not particularly helpful and it may in fact be rather terrifying because we don't know who this God is or what this God is up to. The priest localizes God by creating a space for God and naming God: *this* God is *here*.

Now that's of course what Jesus did so wondrously and so shatteringly. Jesus localized the God of Israel in such an intimate and concrete way that we say with St. John that he is Son of God, God incarnate. Jesus localized and named God everywhere he happened to be. People came to Jesus and met God in loving, judging, saving action. They came and they came because the great God was here localized as covenantal grace, and named with a Name they knew from birth: *Abba, Father*. And they gave praise and thanks. And some of course were scandalized by the very notion that Jesus should dare so to localize and so to name the holy One of Israel.

When God says, "You shall be for me a priestly people," that's what God means. We shall, together, localize and name

God in the world. Not any old god, but precisely the God who is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not vaguely present everywhere but precisely here.

Our congregations are called to do this. How well does your congregation do this? Does anybody in your town know you're there?

To do it at all we must keep at our center the only things by which the true God can be localized and named, viz., Word and Sacrament. I am astonished at the numbers of congregations for whom the testimony of Word and Sacrament are no longer enough, indeed, who demand that the means of grace be *validated* by some kind of religious experience. Understand me: I cherish variety in worship; I am as incensed as anyone by dullness, draggy hymns, unimaginative preaching, the droning of lessons. But there is grave danger that our yearning—and sometimes lusting—for religious experience becomes a new workrighteousness, so that what we localize is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ but simply a religious experience.

“You shall be for me a priestly kingdom,” says God. That's partnership that requires Word and Sacrament always in the center.

⁶ *There's another dimension to this partnership: “You shall be for me a holy nation.”*

We've noted that there is a dark partnership: a conniving, power-seeking, even malignant and criminal partnership—and a partnership of silence that keeps it hidden. God's people are not immune to dark partnership. You can name congregations where factions battle with each other and with the pastor, where the mouths of church councils and members are full of knives and barbed wire, where even death threats are made anonymously. How is that possible in a congregation or church called to be *holy*?

If holiness means anything, it means *different*. Something holy is not like the rest of the stuff; it's different. Different in what way? Well, since this is God talking, something holy is different in the way God is different. And what way is that? Again, I must point you to Jesus.

When you study Jesus closely as he moves among people, he stands out: he is different. Let's put it this way: Jesus has a

different set of values. They're different than the values of the society, and sometimes they're also different from those held by the religious folks. Look only at one passage in the NT, the Beatitudes in Matthew: Blessed are the poor, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the ones persecuted for righteousness' sake. Does Conrad Black live by these values? The Reichmans? The governor of the Bank of Canada? Does Macmillan-Bloedel? Inco? K.C. Irving? Don't be silly, you say!

Does your congregation? Or is your congregation and our church just like Macmillan-Bloedel and CIBC and every other enterprise whose bottom line is you-know-what?

"You shall be for me a holy nation." Different.

The long and the short of that "different" is that we hold up to the world a different way of doing things and different ways of dealing with people: ways that are deeply gracious and profoundly just. We show the world an *alternative: graciousness and justice!* And—get this: whenever we see an alternative to the world's killing ways we shout Hallelujah! and testify that that is a sign of God's life-giving presence! Because it's different: it's holy, like something Jesus would do.

"You shall be for me a holy nation."

⁷ *Being partners together with God is to be a priestly kingdom and do what a holy nation does.*

We know about that kind of partnership. We are called to manifest that partnership wherever we go and whatever we do. But especially are we called to manifest it as congregations and as a National Church. Friends, you can't imagine how important that is! Listen to Marc Gellman:

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, "Why don't you clean up this mess?" So God collected rocks... and put them together... Then God collected water... in pools... Then the angels said, "Well, God, it's neater now, but is it finished?" And God answered, "NOPE!"

On some of the rocks God placed growing things and creeping things... and the angels asked God, "Is the world finished now?" And God answered, "NOPE!"

God made a man and a woman... and said to them, "I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me... really it's almost done."

But the man and woman said, "We can't finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little."

"You are big enough," God answered them. "But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner."

... "What's a partner?" and God answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That's the deal." And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, "Is the world finished yet?" and God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."⁴

Notes

- ¹ Preached at the Opening Service of the National Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, Vancouver, B.C., 30 June 1993.
- ² Stuart McLean, *Welcome Home* (Toronto: Viking, 1992).
- ³ Craig Rhodenizer, "The Importance of the Communal Aspect of Word and Sacrament in the Life of the Individual Christian," Comprehensive Paper, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (April 1993) 1. Used by permission.
- ⁴ Marc Gellman, *Does God Have A Big Toe? Stories About Stories in the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 1-3.