

Partners

A sermon by the Rev. Ronald D. Gerber

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Albany, N.Y.
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Eternal God, your glory is infinite,
and You offer us the gift of sharing in it.
Fill us now with the vision of your glory,
that we may always love, serve and praise you.
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
One God, For Ever and Ever.

Rabbi Marc Gellman rewrites the stories of the Bible for children, and writes books for adults which explain Judaism for Christians. Here is Rabbi Gellman's retelling¹ of the first chapter of Genesis:

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 from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, "Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be . . . just rocks."

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, "Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of the water will be...just water."

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 things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, "Is the world finished now?" And God answered:

"NOPE!"

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust 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."

The man and the woman asked, "What's a partner?" and God answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that 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."

Partners. Partners with God. That's the bottom line! Before all else, before God seeks us out as a lover, a servant or a worshiper, God makes us partners. That is our fundamental, basic, primitive relationship with God. Partners. God has no brother, sister, friend, spouse, servant or even a pet. . . but becomes hopelessly entangled with us. As Rabbi Gellman says: someone to work with God on a big thing that neither God nor we can do alone. Partners!

There are hints of this in the Biblical text: On the sixth day of Creation, God says: Let's make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; which God does and then says: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. In other words, God says: Look. I've made it and I give it all to you: the fish

¹Marc Gellman, *Does God Have a Big Toe?*, Harper Collins, 1989, ISBN: 0-06-440453-6, pp. 1-3.

of the sea, the birds of the air and every living thing that moves on the earth — every plant, every tree, every beast of the earth, everything that has within it the breath of life. Take care of it and protect it. If you mess it up, if you wreck it, you are the only ones who can repair it and make it right.

There's another hint at the end of today's first reading: On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done. Today we talk about closure, our modern rather arrogant obsessive need to have closure to a disturbing experience; that somehow, by an act of will or manipulation, counseling and therapy we can complete the experience — put a period to it. Get it behind us, and move on. But this is not Biblical. The Hebrews who wrote down these wonderful old stories in Genesis would not have understood. There is no completion or closure to creation. It may be finished, but only in the sense of God saying to us, God's partners: "Here is all you need. There won't be any more. But now what are you going to do with it? I've given it all to you, including your minds, intellects, emotions, feelings, imaginations . . . How now are you going to use all this? How are you going to build on it? How are you going to be creative with what I have given you? . . . , Partners!"

There is in a hymn with words by Christopher Idle this line:

The Song is unfinished: How shall we complete it?
And where find the skill to perfect all God's praise?

Or this, by the poet Catherine Cameron:

God, who stretched the spangled heavens
Infinite in time and place,
Flung the suns in burning radiance
Through the silent fields of space:
We, your children in your likeness,
Share inventive powers with you:
Great creator, still creating,
Show us what we yet may do.

As each far horizon beckons,
May it challenge us anew:
Children of creative purpose,
Serving others, honoring you.
May our dreams prove rich with promise:
Each endeavor well begun:
Great creator, give us guidance
Till our goals and yours are one.

Well, this is all well and good. But now let's bring it home to focus on one of the reasons we are here this morning: the Baptism of Silas.

Silas — the answer to the prayers of so many; a blessing to his parents, to his extended family and this parish community.

What if anything does this have to do with little Silas? This morning in Baptism he will be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's Own for ever. And we will receive him into the household of God — where we expect him, with us, to confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his Resurrection and share with us in Christ's eternal priesthood. But Baptism also makes Silas a partner with God and a partner with us in creation. And the Baptismal liturgy makes that clear. Soon this morning we are going to make some rather incredible promises — on behalf of Silas, of course — but also for ourselves, and we do this every time we participate in a Baptism.

The questions which contain the promises are directed to all of us, not just to the parents, Godparents, and sponsors — but to all of us.

Some of you probably know them by heart:

Will you continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?
Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?
Will you see and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Sound familiar? Nothing new. But how do we answer when those questions are asked of us? What is our answer — our response?

I will, with God's help! . . . I will, with God's help!

There it is. We've got our work cut out for us. And because it is not a simple matter of human will or perseverance but superhuman tasks demanding our best efforts and then some, we invoke God's help. We not only acknowledge our dependence on God for keeping these expansive and incredible promises; we also invite and welcome God to partner with us.

And what about Silas? For right now, Silas is a rather passive participant in all this. He's not giving his consent and he's not making any promises. But, our prayer on this day is that he will sometime in the future give his consent and make these promises his own.

And so, this morning we will pray God to give Silas an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage and will to persevere, a spirit to know God and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works. All things necessary to partner with God in the world.

And what is our role in all this? It's a big one, really. As Silas grows in years and grace and the knowledge and love of the Lord, he has to be able to see and experience these promises being kept and fulfilled around him. He needs to see and experience them being lived out in those who love and care for him, and nurture and accompany him in the years ahead. He needs to see and know folks who continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers — to have people in his life who participate in the community where the scriptures are read and treasured, where the Eucharist is celebrated and the Bread of Life consumed, and where the stories of faith are told — not just the old Biblical stories but the continuing present day stories that witness to the great things that God continues to do in our lives.

Silas needs to know folks who persevere in resisting evil, including the evil we allow to be done on our behalf, folks who when they sin — and note it isn't *if* they sin but *when* — repent, acknowledge the hard reality, and return to the Lord.

Silas needs to know and experience folks who proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, who seek and serve Christ in all persons, who love others as they love themselves, who actively seek out and serve others as they have been sought after and served . . . gently patiently persevering in that quiet compelling love that seeks no reward or recognition and sets no condition.

And finally Silas needs to grow up around folks who courageously and openly strive for justice and peace among all people; who make it a priority in their lives to respect the dignity of every human being regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age or religious belief.

That is what we here this morning all promise to do as examples for him in the years ahead. And I wonder: Can Silas depend on us? Will we be there for him in this? Because in the future — 20, 35, 50, 60 years from now — some angel in glory will ask God: "Is the world finished yet?" And God will answer: "I don't know. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. Go, Ask Silas!"