

"THIS IS A SYNERGISTIC CORPORATION"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 31, 1988

"THIS IS A SYNERGISTIC CORPORATION"

TEXT: "....therefore, my beloved....work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you..."

Philippians 2: 12 and 13

INTRODUCTION

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Remember when "redemption centers" appeared along with green stamps. That was terribly exciting. And then there was "charisma" which circulated among a much more sophisticated crowd. "Charisma" in the Bible refers to a gift of the Holy Spirit, but in the public arena of today it seems to refer to something like a "magnetic personality".

And now there's another word that has crossed over, a wonderful word. The word is "synergism". It caught my eye right away, that ad that read, "This is a synergistic corporation". I felt like a tourist in a foreign land who hears his native language spoken. I hadn't heard that word since seminary, in a course in church history, having to do with a faction in the Lutheran Church near the end of the 16th century.

DEVELOPMENT

I learned synergism as a technical word used in the debates over determinism and free will. There were those who said that our lives are completely determined by God. Every step of our way is determined by God. They were the determinists. And the other side said that individuals determine their own destinies. These were the advocates of free will.

But there was a third position on the subject, a middle ground, that said individuals and God work together. And those people were called "Synergists", from a Greek word which means working together.

In theology it means something more than that. It means working together in such a way as to produce something that otherwise wouldn't have been possible. And interestingly enough, that's exactly the message that was in the ad. Their claim was that as a result of this combination of the divisions in that corporation, they produce something that is unique, something of the highest quality, that otherwise could not be produced. Synergism: it means working together in such a way as to produce something that otherwise would not have been possible.

TODAY'S TEXT

And that's what Paul is communicating to the Philippians in our text for this morning.

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,
for God is at work in you..."

That's what synergism originally meant. The experience of doing something, but

sensing that it was also being done for you. Like starting toward a goal and discovering that you are being led. Or, trying to rebuild your life, doing it on your own efforts. And when you finally succeed, looking back and realizing that the new life you have achieved is really a gift.

There is a wonderful mystery about life. It's called synergism, and Paul talked about it all the time. To the Corinthians, talking about his life, he said he worked hard to achieve who he is. And then he says, "Yet not I but the grace of God working in me". Augustine put it in the famous formula for synergism:

"Without God we cannot.
Without us God will not."

That's what synergism means. The "I, but not I" experience of human life.

DELIGHTFUL ANECDOTE

I ran across a delightful anecdote in some reading that illustrates this. The writer happened to be writing about those huge suburban shopping malls, like the Maine Mall in Portland, Maine that I've come to know quite well from summer vacations in that area. The author doesn't like malls. He thinks that they are too big and cold and impersonal. He contrasts them to the old department stores, the ones that he remembered in his town, where a floorwalker walked the aisles, answering people's questions and being of assistance to them. The floorwalker, he remembered, at this particular store was named Mr. Rosen. He wrote that he walked through the aisles with his hands clasped behind his back, looking more professorial than mercantile. In fact, he was quite scholarly. He went home to his apartment every night and read books.

People would ask him, "Where do you find the pajamas?" And he would answer them in a polite, clear and concise way, never taking offense that a person of such erudition would have to stoop to answer such mundane questions. People always came away feeling that they were important, that they had been treated with dignity. So Mr. Rosen was a legend in that town.

One of his answers to a question put to him by a customer is still famous. A woman, exasperated by her failure to find just the right dress, blurted out to him, "Heavens, it will take a miracle for me to find it. Do you believe in miracles?" Mr. Rosen smiled and said, "No - but I rely on them all the time."

REFLECTION

We make our way. We take the initiative. We do things on our own. We may never think about divine guidance, or providence, in our life. And yet, if we are sensitive at all, if we are reflective at all, if we ever take the time to sit back and to look over our lives, then we will see that there is a power at work in our lives that we rely on all the time.

That's what Paul is reminding the Philippians. "Work out your own salvation....for God is at work in you". Paul was their father in the faith. Paul founded the church in Philippi. It was Paul who gave them their first instruction in the faith. Now Paul is in prison in Rome, and they know, and Paul knows that he is not going to get out of there alive. Oh, Paul talks about coming to them again. In fact, he even tells them that he is making plans to do it. But, they can read between the lines. They know that the chances are

that he won't. And he prepares them for that. He says,

"You're going to have to work out your own salvation, because I'm not going to be there anymore. You're on your own."

It's really an amazing counsel of freedom when you think about it, because there are so many competing views of what constituted true Christianity in the early Church. Some of them disagreed with Paul. Some of them were just waiting for Paul to be done in so that they could move in, take over his churches, correct his errors, convert everybody to their way of thinking. And Paul didn't like them. He called them names, and he considered them to be dangerous.

But he gives the Philippians freedom to choose their own way. He doesn't try to indoctrinate them. He doesn't try to coerce them with threats. He doesn't try to manipulate them with self-pity. He frees them. He says, "Work out your own salvation".

BE HUMBLE ABOUT IT

And then he tells them to be humble about it. That's the meaning of that phrase, "In fear and trembling." I used to think it had reference to our relationship to God, as in "the fear of the Lord". It sounds like that, but that is not what it refers to. It means humility, and it has reference to our relationship with other people. It was a common idiom in the first century. It appears in other kinds of literature, and Paul uses it in two of his letters. To the Corinthians he writes that he plans to come to them "in fear and trembling". Which means that he plans to come to them humbly.

And he uses it now again here, in Philippians, in the second chapter. And I remind you that it's the second chapter. The context is important, as it always is in scripture. That chapter begins by saying,

"Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself".

And then immediately follows the passage about Jesus emptying himself and taking on the form of a servant, humbling himself for our sake. And then immediately after that comes today's text,

"Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling"

which means, work it out in humility. He's applying the same teaching of humility to religious experience. Do not consider what you have experienced better than what others have. And don't expect your experience to be normative for everybody else.

Have you ever had that experience of feeling guilty or inferior because you haven't had the kind of clearly defined religious experience that other people have had? We all have. Some people intend, I think, to make us feel this way. Others unintentionally just make us feel that way.

There is a certain kind of person who assumes that what they have experienced, no matter what it is, is what everybody else needs. They will

recommend that you eat at a certain restaurant. They say, "You will like it", only the way they say it, it sounds like "You will like it." And when you are on your trip, they find out where you are going and say, "Listen, go to East Oblivion! You'll like it...you'll love it...it's a wonderful place. And it's only 200 miles out of your way."

They mean well, but they suffer what in philosophy is called the "ego-centric predicament" which means that they think their experience is universal. And it is not - not in taste, not in style, and not even in religious experience. So when somebody comes up to you and says that if you have not experienced what they have experienced, then you are not a Christian - say to them, on the authority of Paul,

"Look, friend...why don't you work out your own salvation, in fear and trembling...and I'll work on mine."

I have a friend, a colleague - and not really a friend, from the Unification Church who keeps trying to help me "see the light" - his way, and recently I find myself saying in an exasperating way, "Look...you do your thing...and let me do mine...and I wish you well."

DIFFERENT Because, we are all different. We come from different backgrounds. We have different temperaments and emotions. We have different experiences. We are at different places along our spiritual journeys. God is at work in you. You can count on that. But you can also count that God is at work in you where you are.

My experience of God is different than yours because my journey has been different. I've been on my journey a long time now. And some have only just started on theirs. Some are farther along than I am. We're all different.

But there is a similarity in content. The content of Christian experience is grace. We all experience grace - the movement of God toward us in love. But the ways we experience that will be different. John Wesley put it for Methodists. Sometimes it will be "sudden and dramatic", and sometimes it will be "gradual and cumulative". For some it will be as if it dropped out of the sky, hit us like a ton of bricks. That's the way it was for Paul on the road to Damascus. It turned him around - 180 degrees. But for others, it will come from one day realizing how much we have been loved. And for others, it will come from a decision that Christ is the way we want to be. Or, like the disciples, a decision to follow Him in our daily lives. The Holy Spirit can not be put into a straight jacket - this way and this way only.

Or it may happen the way it came to Wesley. In the very midst of frustration, failing in a venture that he wanted very much to succeed in (actually he was fired from it and sent home to England), he was sitting in a church, listening to the preacher read about how we are saved by God's grace and not by our own works, and feeling his "heart strangely warmed". I remind you that that experience did not turn John Wesley's life around. It got him moving in the direction he had always been traveling.

It's always different because we are different. So work out your own salvation in fear and trembling. Make it your own spiritual journey in humility.

And then that last phrase, "For God is at work in you!" That's the line that Paul wants us to underline. That's the assurance that he wants to pass on to us and take along with us...our "take home" message.

YOU CAN RELY ON HIM!

You may not see God at work in your life, but you can rely on Him. It's something that you have got to do by yourself, but you won't be alone. It's a matter of synergism. You have to make the effort. You have to do your part. At times it may seem that you are doing it all alone...that you're out there all by yourself. And then at other times you will be astounded and amazed and realize that what has happened in your life was more than just your own effort - far more. It's difficult to express, but it's something like finding your own way, and when you get there, discovering that you were led. I've had it happen and perhaps you have, too.

That's the way that the American poet of a hundred years ago, William Cullen Bryant, expressed it. He often observed the miracle of migrating birds. We know something about that. A year ago this April there was an article in the Times about Northville and migrating Canadian geese. I grew up not far from Northville, and know it well. The birds migrate every year to the south and then fly back on the same date every year, to the same place, landing for a rest in a park near the firehouse in Northville. It's always the same date and last April they even closed the schools and had the High School Band ready to play when the returning birds stopped off at Northville on their way north. I loved it. The world's record holder for distance, incidentally, is the Golden Plover, which travels eight thousand miles every year from the Arctic to Argentina. Amazing!

There are scientific theories about how that is done, none of which takes any of the wonder away from it for the believer. And that's what Bryant had in mind as a metaphor of your life's pilgrimage and mine. That's why he wrote that line - one of my favorites - in his poem To A Waterfowl. Listen carefully for he's saying the same thing Paul said long ago:

"He who from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright."

PRAYER

For this lifting word of Paul that Thou art at work in each of us, O God, we thank You. As we depart from here to continue to "work out our own salvation"...to do those tasks we have committed ourselves to do, to do those things we feel called to do, may Your spirit be felt in our lives, leading us, yes...strengthening us and guiding us...knowing that with You indeed all things are possible. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

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PRAYER

For this lifting word of Paul that Thou art at work in each of us, O God, we thank You. As we depart from here to continue to "work out our own salvation"...to do those tasks we have committed ourselves to do, to do those things we feel called to do, may Your spirit be felt in our lives, leading us, yes...strengthening us and guiding us...knowing that with You indeed all things are possible. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 31, 1988

O GOD, OUR FATHER - in the mystery and the wonder of worship, we would draw near to You. Make us sensitive to Your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments of prayer.

ENFOLD us with Your loving care.

SPEAK to each of us the word that we need to hear, that special word that will lift us and make a difference in our lives.

MAY WE FIND in every act of our worship - in the sounds of the organ, the singing of the hymns, the anthems of the choir, the reading of the Scripture, the preaching of Your word, - in all of these may we feel that deep and abiding assurance of Your Eternal and Abiding Truth.

THOU GOD OF COMFORT, be near to those who may be feeling the burden of age, the pain of illness, the lure of temptation, the anguish of indecision, the inner turmoil of uncertainty.

WORK through nurses and physicians, social workers and teachers, counsellors and psychiatrists, writers and lawyers, public servants and government officials...all who influence others for good to bring hope and healing, peace and justice to our life together in this land.

OUR PRAYERS this day reach out to include loved ones from whom we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by love and concern.

WE PRAY FOR each other...for those sitting near us in the pews this morning - those to our left, those to our right.

Grant that that person may be blessed with inner peace and tranquility, with that perspective of "higher ground" that worship can provide.

LORD, GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that the influence of another Sunday may be strong in our land, and that all who worship You this day may be given strong hearts to bear their burdens, willing hearts to bear the burdens of others.

DIRECT US in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us our sins. And make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow His way. In His name and spirit we pray.

(choral Amen)

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer,
believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched
Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall
strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of
the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good
with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.
They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run
and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that who-
soever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting
life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:
who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy
diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on
Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News:
We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for
others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with
healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1. <u> Mabelle White </u> | 2. <u> Charles Jaqua - </u> | 3. <u> </u> |
| | <u> Julie's f^rther </u> | |
| 4. <u> Betty Stagemyer </u> | 5. <u> </u> | 6. <u> </u> |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and
the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to Nancy Ward who in recent
days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of
us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our
hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray....
For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught
us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy
Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in
heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not
into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the
Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation...a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, January 31, 1988

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation...delighted to have you....and we hope that the opportunity will be ours to greet you...
- B. Be free in the sharing...take a moment to fill out...sign one of the....join us on other Sundays...work with us...
- C. You worship in a church that next month celebrates its 151st birthday. At this corner since 1837. 4th building...minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. The parish concerns are listed in your bulletin...review them on your own in these moments...noting...
- B. Bake Sale today as a part of the coffee hour, for the benefit of our All Church Picnic of June. Support it with a purchase. Thanks to Doreen Morales for his extraordinary efforts in...
- C. Note, too, that the Adult Fellowship has a Super Bowl Party in the works for later today at the parsonage. Game begins around 6...come before that time and enjoy some super snacks and an exciting football which the Red Skins are going to win.

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.
Denver 17...and the Skins 43."

- D. Membership Committee will be passing out name tags today, and invite you to put one on and wear it after the service, and make a point of getting to know two new friends.

...of
E. Outreach Committee has a supper meeting scheduled for a week from Tuesday evening. February 9th, 6:30. Russell Room.

- F. Today's the last Sunday to pick up your box of 1988 offering envelopes. Downstairs on a table in the rear of the RR.

III. LAST SUNDAY

- A. Our Church is a warm, intimate and caring fellowship...for many it becomes an extended family...our lives are connected and we feel a loss when someone moves away from here.

B. In the words of the hymn:

"When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain,
But we shall still be joined in heart, and hope
to meet again."

C. Today is the last Sunday for Anne Davenport and also for John Tucker. Anne is moving to Pennsylvania....John to San Francisco. We thank both of them for their many labors of love in our midst in recent years and wish them God's greatest blessings.

D. One additional word. Anne is a Denver Bronco loyalist and I think...I could be wrong...was responsible for a message last Sunday on my telephone machine, after giving my Superbowl prediction:

"One for the money, two for the show.
Broncos are the one, honey...
And you know where you can go!"

(Amen)

OFFERING

A. "Jesus said: It is more blessed to give than it is to receive".

RUMMAGE SALE: Our thanks to those who shared in yesterday most successful Rummage Sale... profits exceeded \$1800... which go to the Methodist Camp Service and help children to a week at Summer camp. A special word of thanks to Dianne Keller, coordinator of the Rummage Sale, and to her first assistant and chairperson of the Outreach Committee, Janet Ernst.