

Partners

Several years ago now two little five-year old boys arrived early for kindergarten. They were just able to struggle along under the weight of cowboy boots, Wild West hats, and the other impedimenta of Marlboro Country – the old west. As they came down the hall, I couldn't be sure whether they were swaggering in pride or just staggering under the load of all that gear – but they were sorta holdin' each other up, arm in arm, in good camaraderie, cowboy fashion – and as they passed by – one of them - feeling a sudden need to explain said to me – pointing a thumb at the other one. “Him and me is podners!” And off they went down the hall together to kindergarten – happy as happy could be....

“Him and me is podners” - that's bad grammar I know – even for kindergarten – but as a matter of fact it's good New Testament Christianity - for the noun koinonos in the New Testament means “partner” and koinnonia which is usually rendered “fellowship” might better be “partnership” – and that's really what Christianity and the church is all about. It's being partners with each other because we are in partnership with God. That's the sense of the invitation in 1 John 1:3:

“have fellowship (be partners) with us:
and truly our fellowship (partnership)
is with the Father, and with his son,
Jesus Christ”

-that is to say – join hands with us in a common faith, share with us in a common future, belong with us, hold life in common with us, be a part of our community, walk with us here, work with us here, laugh and suffer with us – “let us be partners together because we are in partnership with God.” This was a very winning invitation – offering companionship in a great cause – youth of the first century found it irresistible – followed it – for life – to death.

For a long time I have been trying to set down a decent definition of happiness – one that is neither limp with sentiment nor starched with intellect. I think that in this New Testament word, fellowship or partnership, we have the key to it – for to find koinnonia means “to find companionship in a great cause.” And is that not to find happiness also? To discover that you are in partnership with others who share with you a great purpose? Is this not what the Christian Church, the Christian family, the Christian community is supposed to be? – partners with each other as with God? Are we not supposed to be the happy ones just because we have found companionship in a great cause? Is this not the source of Christian joy?

Let us examine therefore the first part this Christian koinnonia - this New Testament fellowship - this partnership – this companionship – the horizontal part – that

which binds Christians to each other. The New Testament indicates at least ^{page 5} 160 ^{Homeline} of our partnership with each other.

To the youth of the first century the New Testament said something very telling – said in effect (makes it clear) that we Christians take part with all men in being fully human. We believe that under God - no man, no woman is ever alone, isolated in dreams, in solitary hopes, private fears – no one is by himself in strength, or in weakness or in desire or in fulfillment or in pain. The author of Hebrews speaks of our being partners “in flesh and blood” (2:14). There’s something still very appealing in that – and so we are – all of us, bone of the same bone, we are blood of the same blood, and part and parcel - of the same life stuff – we are growing together, laboring together, laughing together, loving together, playing together, fighting together – the race of Adam, we are one breath, one hunger, one death. Thus how foolish, how naïve, how needless ^{page 7} line 2 to pretend we are separate – disparate – some superior - some inferior – how silly man’s ^{page 7} line 4 pride, the snobbish intellectuals, the strutting rulers, the dominant race, the physically strong – how foolish to be vain, when underneath all - lie common bone and common blood destined for common ground. No, no room for dividing us all up. In the New Testament faith deep ties bind us closer together than we would, make us partners - whether or not - in life’s mysterious purpose. And if companionship in the acts of existence should dispel pride – it should dispel loneliness too. No man, no woman, you and I – we are not all alone in our hurt or in our joy – though there seem points – especially the deepest hurts, the highest joys – of utter isolation, unspeakable, incommunicable, (how can you tell your hurt, your joy?) But, no, underneath lies this common humanity – other ^{page 8} line 9 also joy like this, hurt like this, you and I do not laugh or cry alone. This is the companionship of all humanity – partners we are – part of one another – in more ways than we would be or in more ways than we know. Don’t you see it was irresistible doctrine – for the young are quick to join hand and heart and so the church grew a community of “brethren” – partners in shared friendship? I like the Quaker name for the Christian community – “the society of friends.” I wish that’s what we –well – that’s what we ought to be.

Unfortunately we are the products of an increasingly impersonal and un-friendly society. This shows up in our foolishly scientized – sterilized – antiseptic vocabulary. We have been moving away from the warm, living – human words to chilly detached, pseudoscientific speech. For example, I am not talking to you – I am verbalizing - riding horseback isn’t fun – its therapeutic – a fall isn’t frightening - it’s traumatic.

We don’t have a circle of friends – we develop a sensitivity group. We don’t even fall in love – we relate.

This depersonalizing of the vocabulary - in part - is based on our fear of one another – it’s the way we try to keep other humans at a “proper” or improper distance. For this same reason, we crave statistics the way an addict craves drugs – it’s to escape -

to cope – the warm – the human – the fearful, the wonderful in life. We dry it all up in neat bundles of statistics thinking we can file them away when they get to be a bother. It's easier to live with statistics than with people.

But the Christian of this century ought not to be anymore afraid of having partners – any more ashamed of shared friendship – than the Christians of the first century. The Christian family sought to be a partnership. Where is the happy family today? – it is not where the members close that artificial generation gap and are warm friends? Why be afraid of our own kin? Why can't they be among your boon companions? Why all this holding back of affection at home of all places? Why must every member of a family keep his distance, refuse a hug around the neck, hesitate to say, "I love you and mean it. (Sure – some creative fighting)

The other night I attended the hobby show here. I couldn't help but notice one little family group in particular. Without any falseness at all, it was perfectly obvious that this father and mother and those children were partners – arguing -? Yes! But the way that little boy looked at his dad said as plain as day – "Him and me is podners."

Isn't that the way it should be – in a Christian family? Even in a Christian business? – not to mention the Christian church?

Shouldn't your business and church be the company of friends, too? This is certainly the way to find your bit of happiness on the job – it's to find that you are bound together by ties of friendship and not just the old paycheck. It's looking forward to seeing and being with those wonderful confounded idiots – the people you work with, the companionship of their foibles as well as their strengths, their partnership in a common purpose.

And you will not be happy in this part of the Church either unless you feel you are a part – part and parcel – of it all – unless here you open yourself to the friendship of our faith – and our limitations too, the partnership of our blunders as well as our triumphs, unless you feel at one with our worship, throw in your lot with our work – otherwise you are a spectator, a critic. Why not be a pilgrim with us in church – walk with us as we are, be our companion – help us to become what Christ wants us all to be – be a functioning part of this body which the New Testament calls the body of Christ. So you will be all the things Paul called his Christian friends

You will be our "fellow-servant"
our "fellow-worker"
our "fellow-citizen"
our "fellow-soldier"
our "fellow-prisoner" even, but also
our "fellow-heir"

Paul said to his Christian friends – be partners with us, "suffer with" us, "labor with" us, and "rejoice with" us. How many of these phrases of comradeship – friendship – occur in the writings of Paul!

This is a major part of the secret of the early church's amazing growth. It was a community of friends – “all one body we” – here a man belonged – was a part – so a partner – here were his companions in the deepest sense – so he didn't mind sharing – sharing his money, his property – “holding all things in common” – because as a Christian, he couldn't stand – couldn't bear - to have too much while others had too little – so he gave away – gave his strong arms to work, gave his cash to buy, his love to support, his faith to guide, for were not all partners - partners together – joint heirs of Jesus Christ?

Were not they all companions in a great cause? Our companionship with one another as Christians is theologically and ethically conditioned by our companionship with Christ. “If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, (1 John 1:7) and the blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanseth us from all sin.”

When we take the part of others – it is because He has taken our part.

When we share with others – it is because He shares with us.

When we give – it is because He has given.

And in it all – we thereby take His part – share with Him – give to Him. In as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren – ye have done it unto me.

So the Christian partnership is complete –

As we share the life of Christ – we share the life of others – we are partners together – companions in a great cause – the source of Christian joy.