

Birds of a Feather: A Lesson in Synergy

1 Peter 4:8-11 Matthew 25:14-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On this Commitment Sunday, when we demonstrate our re-commitment to God, and to the life and ministry of this particular community of faith, through the pledging and offering of our time, talents and financial resources, I want to begin with a definition. The word is **synergy**.

Synergy is a word used in a variety of contexts, whether it be in business, medicine, sports, education, or science. The simplest definition is that **the whole is greater than the sum of its parts**. More specifically, synergy is the interaction of elements that when combined produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the individual elements, contributions, etc.

It's not hard to see how that can apply to any group working toward a common goal, and that includes the church. While each and every member and friend of this congregation, for example, is unique and offers their own specific abilities and resources for the common good, it is a fact that **we can accomplish more together than if each of us acts independently**. Here's a great recent example. Just this past week representatives from 5 different progressive congregations got together to talk about forming a new combined youth group since each of the churches didn't have enough young people to effectively have their own group. Those churches included College Hill, Fellowship Congregational, Bethany Christian, Eastside Christian, and First Lutheran.

We experience synergy, then, when we cooperate and work together. In our case, the overall goal is to further the realm of God in our midst. This concept is expressed in today's Epistle reading from 1 Peter 4:8-11. It starts with the very basics needed for community. "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining" (vv 8-9). And in fitting with our theme of what it means to be a good steward, it states, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." (v 10). **What gifts have you received through God's grace?**

The scriptures are filled with examples that teach us that it takes the **commitment** of each and every one of us in order to function to the best of our ability as a community of faith. We are reminded time and time again that each one of us is blessed with different gifts, talents and abilities. And, **it takes all of us working together in order to fulfill the mission to which God has called us. That's the very definition of synergy.**

This concept of synergy was also expressed beautifully in a short work by Dr. Robert McNeish back in 1972 entitled, **Lessons From the Geese**. Interestingly, it has been just in the past few weeks that we've started noticing flocks of migrating geese flying

overhead in their familiar “V” formation. Dr. McNeish was a science teacher before he became involved in school administration in Baltimore. He was intrigued with observing geese for many years and first wrote this piece for a sermon he delivered at this church. **McNeish took migration characteristics of geese and applies the concepts to human behavior and teamwork.** This piece has gone on to be used worldwide, primarily in business management seminars, and also by Toastmasters International and even the Boy Scouts of America. It's application is also well known among professional bicycle racers.

It was McNeish's first application, in that sermon to his community of faith, that it may have its deepest meaning. I want to share it with you today in the context of **practicing good stewardship – of working together as a congregation. These lessons also have much to teach us about living together in community.** So without further ado, here are the five short lessons, with a brief commentary by McNeish and myself.

Lessons from Geese – # 1

As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an “uplift” for the bird that follows. By flying in a V formation, the whole flock adds 71% more flying range than if each bird flew alone.

The Lesson:

People who share a common direction and a sense of community can go further, and get where they are going quicker and easier, because they are traveling on the support [and energy] of one another.

In the context of a congregation, we can accomplish so much more through the energy generated when we all participate together (whether it be in worship, committee work, fellowship events, mission projects, educational opportunities, work days, etc.).

Lessons from Geese – # 2

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone, so it quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the “lifting power” of the bird immediately in front.

The Lesson:

If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formations with those who are headed where we want to go.

Now that doesn't mean, of course, that we all have to “fall in line” in a way that we all think or act alike, because we know we don't. We all know the difference between unity and uniformity. That does mean, however, that following a common vision for ministry helps contribute to our sense of unity and calling as a community of faith.

Lessons from Geese – # 3

When the lead goose gets tired it rotates back into formation and another goose flies at the point position.

The Lesson:

It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing the leadership with others.

For as with geese, we are interdependent upon one another.

This becomes even more crucial in smaller congregations. We know people get tired, and it's only right and necessary to take a break and step back from leadership positions. That's not only good for the leader, it's also good for the overall health and diversity of the congregation. However, if people don't step up to the plate and relieve those who are in leadership positions, then burnout can become a very real possibility.

Therefore, we need either your time of rest, or your time of hard work in the coming year! And that may require a bit more of a sacrifice on all of our part as we continue to make the mission and ministry of College Hill a priority in our lives.

Lessons from Geese – # 4

The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

The Lesson:

When we “honk” at others, we need to make sure our honking provides encouragement, not something that is less than helpful.

While it's true that constructive criticism is both helpful and necessary, we may need to remind ourselves from time to time that it's very different from just basic complaining and negativity, or being passive aggressive because things aren't done the way we want them done.

So let us strive to be encouragers, not critics, of one another.

Lessons from Geese – # 5

When a goose gets sick or wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with the goose until it is either able to fly again or dies. Then they launch out on their own, join another formation, or catch up with the flock.

The Lesson:

Again, if we have as much sense as geese, we'll stand by each other.

In any congregation, not everyone is “up” or filled with dynamic energy all the time. Each and every one of us goes through emotional, physical, and spiritual cycles. Sometimes we're up and sometimes we're down. It is when we recognize that someone is down that those of us who are up need to provide support. This is important, because sooner or later those who are up will be down, and will then be the ones in need of the support of others.

So with the help of these 5 Lessons From the Geese, reflect upon what being committed as a good steward means in your own life, and in the life of this congregation. Focus on your own contribution to the ministry to which God has called you, and us. Remember the wisdom in the old saying, “Birds of a feather flock together.” That's synergy!

Amen.