

Synergy: Lessons Learned from Nature

1 Peter 4:8-11 Mark 12:28-34.
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, music, 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 they 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 member and friend of this congregation, for example, is unique, and you offer your 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. Two of our youth chose to be part of a Confirmation Class this fall. But instead of just doing it in-house ourselves, we've partnered with Southminster Presbyterian Church to have a combined class with a total of six students and lots of adult leadership. We are experiencing synergy when we cooperate, combine ideas, and work together.

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? How are you putting them into practice to further the kingdom of God in our midst?**

The apostle Paul's metaphor of the church being like a human body with each of us being a different part reveals it is only when all are present and work together that the body, whether our physical body or the body of the church, functions properly.

This concept of synergy was also expressed beautifully in a short work by **Dr. Robert McNeish** back in 1972 entitled, **Lessons From the Geese**. You may have noticed that just recently some have started seeing 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 takes migration characteristics of geese and applies the concepts to human behavior**

and teamwork. This writing has been used worldwide, primarily in business management seminars, and by Toastmasters International and even the Boy Scouts of America. Its application is also well known among professional bicycle racers, as you will see. Yet, 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, as I did a decade ago, in the context of **practicing good stewardship – of working and living together as a community of faith.** 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, ministry team 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 why we have rotating classes of ruling elders, and moderators of ministry teams. 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!

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 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 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. Our Congregational Care ministry team does a great job in providing support. However, it's also everyone's responsibility. 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 Geese, from nature itself, reflect upon what being committed as a good steward means in your life, and in the life of this community of faith. Focus on your contributions to the ministry to which God has called you, and us together. And remember the wisdom in the old saying, “Birds of a feather flock together!” That's synergy!

And know that your commitment to College Hill is very deeply appreciated.

Amen.