

## **“Circles of Community”**

**Philemon 1:8-19**

**James 5:1-6**

There are circles of people that the Spirit of God wants to touch and bless, and you are the person through whom the Spirit wants to work. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to conspire with the Spirit to bring blessing to others.

Let's start with your family. Nobody is better positioned to wound and harm your spouse than you, and nobody better to love and enhance your spouse's thriving than you. The same goes for your parents, your children, your siblings. The Spirit wants to conspire with you in making their lives rich, full, free, good, and fruitful.

When Jesus wanted to confront religious hypocrisy in his day, he pointed out the way hypocrites served their religion at the expense of their families. Paul picked up this theme in his letters to the early churches, calling such behavior worse than unbelief. So Paul urged husbands and wives to submit to one another and show one another true love and respect. Although his writings may strike us as chauvinistic by today's standards, they were progressive by the standards of his time, because they promoted mutual responsibility, not merely top-down privilege. Similarly, he told children to obey and honor their parents, and parents to nurture their children and raise them without frustrating them—presumably by excessively high or unclear demands. And Paul repeatedly showed special consideration for widows—which today might mean an elderly aunt, uncle, or grandparent, or any family member who is alone and vulnerable.

Paul quickly moved out from the circle of family to what we would call the circle of work on this Labor Day Weekend. In his day, slavery was a social norm.

Where he had the opportunity—as he did with a church leader named Philemon—he urged slave owners to release their slaves and accept them as equals. Where that couldn't be done, he urged slave owners to transcend the normal master-slave relationship and dare to treat their slaves with kindness—to mirror the kindness of God.

Similarly, he urged slaves to transcend social norms by doing their work with pride and dignity. Before, they might have given the least required by a human master. But now in the Spirit, they would work for and with God. They would do whatever was required and even more, giving their best.

James took Paul's concern for a Spirit-led work ethic to the level of business management and economic policy on this Labor Day Weekend. In strong language, he warned rich employers not to underpay their workers. What employers might call "keeping labor costs low," James called wage theft, and he reminded employers that God hears the cries of every underpaid laborer.

Our economic behavior will change greatly when we stop asking typical questions like "How little will the market or the law allow me to pay this person?" Instead, the Spirit leads people to conspire around new questions like "What would God consider fair and generous pay to this person? How can we expand the bottom line from economic profit to something deeper and broader—economic, social, and ecological benefit? How could our business and economic systems and policies become less harmful and more beneficial to aliveness on planet Earth—for us and for future generations? Could we measure success not by how much we consume and how fast we consume it, but by how well we live, care, and serve?" Just imagine how the business world would change if more and more of us went to work conspiring goodness in the Spirit.

In the next circle out beyond family and work relationships, the Spirit activates our concern for people in our neighborhoods, including strangers we meet on the street. Whatever their race, class, religion, political party, or sexual identity, they, too, are our neighbors, and the Spirit will constantly awaken us to opportunities to serve and care. Biblical writers constantly emphasize the importance of hospitality—especially to strangers. "As you have done for the least of these, you have done for me," Jesus said. So the Spirit is looking for conspirators who are interested in plotting goodness in their communities. "What would our community look like if God's dreams for it were coming true?" we ask. The answer gives us a vision to work toward.

Part of our vision for our Parma School community is to vote for a levy in November to build a new high school. Parma Heights consistently has the lowest voter turnout. In response, Divinity is hosting a training session this Thursday at 7:00 for anyone interested in helping to canvass Parma heights to encourage folks to vote.

From the circles of family, work, and neighborhood, the Spirit moves us to another sphere of concern: vulnerable people who would normally be forgotten. According to James, our religion is nothing but hot air if we don't translate our faith into action in regards to the vulnerable and easily forgotten around us. So the Spirit invites us to conspire for the well-being of orphans, widows, undocumented aliens, refugees, prisoners, people with special needs, the sick, the poor, the homeless, the uneducated, the unskilled, the unemployed, and the underpaid.

Then there's the still larger circle of our civic and community life. We're told in the New Testament to pray for and show due respect for our political leaders. We're told to avoid debt—except the perpetual debt of love that we owe to every human being.

In today's world, that means everyone on the planet, because as never before our world is bound together in one global ecology, one global economy, and one global military-industrial complex. The war in Ukraine is affecting almost everyone around the globe. To be in tune with the Spirit is to transcend all smaller boundaries and to conspire in terms of the planetary whole.

There's another circle that we can't dare forget: the circle that includes our critics, opponents, and enemies—the people who annoy us and those we annoy, the people who don't understand us and those we don't understand, the people who try our patience and those whose patience we try. Rather than write them off as unimportant and unwanted, we need to rediscover them as some of the most important people we know. If we ignore them, our growth in the Spirit will be stunted. If we let the Spirit guide us in what we say to their faces and behind their backs, we will become more Christ-like.

Speaking of our words, one of the most important ways the Spirit moves us to care for people in all these circles is by training us to control the tongue. Words can wound, sometimes deeply: careless words, critical words, condemning words, harsh words, insulting words, dehumanizing words, words of gossip or deception. If your life were a ship, your words would be its rudder, James implies (3:1-12). So if you want to be a mature agent in the movement of the Spirit in our world, conspire with the Spirit in your choice of every single word.

You'll never regret forgoing an unkind word. And you'll never regret uttering a kind and encouraging word. An overworked person doing customer service, a housekeeper in a hotel, a landscaper or janitor, a harried mother on a plane with a cranky child, the cashier at a busy fast food joint, your child's third-grade teacher, the nurse in the emergency room—how much could they be encouraged today by a kind word from you, not to mention by a card, a gift, a large tip, a written note?

If you're a part of the Spirit's conspiracy, you can be God's secret agent of blessing to anyone in any of these circles.

There's one other circle we haven't mentioned: the circle of our community of faith. It's the learning circle that forms whenever we encourage each other to let the Spirit keep flowing and moving in one another's lives.

Pages 14-15 – Albert Haase talks about “Catching Fire and Becoming Flame” in our community of faith . . . We begin by building bonds of support with a regular church community so that we are around other people who are similarly on fire – or at least smoldering! Jesus himself modeled the importance of community with the call of the twelve disciples; the early church lived out its ramifications in a practical way.

Spiritual transformation is not meant to be a solitary, individual affair; nor is it done in isolation from the world. It stretches the heart beyond the ego – “from me to thee,” as a wise spiritual director once told me. Becoming a little Christ involves selfless love and service. This is learned within a community of flesh-and-blood believers who “wash each other’s feet,” learn to forgive each other, celebrate life events as sacramental moments, and welcome to their table the poor, the sinner, and the marginalized.

It's important to keep showing up and to show up with a good attitude. It's especially important to be a channel of blessing to those who lead in our community of faith ... like our Sunday School teachers who start up next Sunday, for example, and being sure they feel truly appreciated. Their work is so important and surprisingly hard. Your encouragement could make the difference in whether they give up or keep giving their best.

The largest circle of all extends beyond humans and includes all living things and the physical structures on which we all depend: air, rain, soil, wind, and climate. You can't claim to love your neighbor and pollute the environment on which he depends. You can't claim to love the Creator and abuse the climate of this beautiful, beloved planet. The Spirit that moves among us is the same Spirit that moves in and through all creation. If we are attuned to the Spirit, we will see all creatures as our companions ... even as our relatives in the family of God, for in the Spirit we are all related.

In all these circles, you can be part of the Spirit conspiracy that is spreading quietly across our world. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to be a secret agent of God's commonwealth, conspiring with others behind the scenes to plot goodness and foment kindness wherever you may be.

Then may the peace of God . . .

#731 – Earth and All Stars