

**“Pull Buddy, Pull!”**

September 24, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. . .”*

*(Philippians 1:27, NRSV)*



Image Credit: "Red Vineyards at Arles." By Vincent Van Gogh, 1888, [www.vincentvangogh.org](http://www.vincentvangogh.org)

The image that accompanies the bulletin cover and sermon this morning is a copy of the one painting Vincent Van Gogh sold while he was alive. It depicts the vineyards at Arles, France in the fall and the workers who are busy gathering in the last harvest. On this first Sunday of fall, and the gospel text from Matthew, I thought it most appropriate . . .

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

*Once upon a time, an out-of-towner drove his car into a ditch in a desolated area. Luckily, a local farmer came to help with his big strong horse named "Buddy."*

*He hitched Buddy up to the car and yelled, "Pull Nellie, pull!" Buddy didn't move.*

*Then the farmer hollered, "Pull Willie, pull!" Buddy didn't respond.*

*Once more the farmer commanded, "Pull Coco, pull!" Still, Buddy didn't do a thing.*

*Then the farmer nonchalantly said, "Pull Buddy, pull!" and the horse easily dragged the car out of the ditch.*

*The motorist was most appreciative and very curious. He asked the farmer why he called the horse by the wrong name three times.*

*The farmer said, "Oh, Buddy is blind and if he thought he was the only one pulling, he wouldn't even try!"<sup>i</sup>*

Sometimes I don't wonder that that is the thought of the overworked and under-appreciated in the office, or at school, or at home, or especially among the folks who serve in churches in any place . . . I do wonder if it isn't also the thought of the ones who never seem to summon up the gumption to put their hands to the plow of *anything that needs to be done*. No one wants to be the only one left to do all the pulling – especially if the load is a heavy one! But, sadly, that is often the case, isn't it?

It just isn't fair to be the one left to do all the work! Especially when so many others around us seem to be standing around waiting for something to happen. This seems especially galling when they don't even lift a finger to help make it happen – whatever "it" is.

And when it comes to all the "its" that people want to happen, it is hard to feel gracious towards others when we feel like Buddy, all alone in the effort.

The problem with feeling this way is that sometimes we feel as though we're the only ones who are truly doing God's work and look down our noses at the others who seem to be doing nothing much. But do we know that? Do we ever talk through our lives with one another well enough to get past our own ideas of one another?

I knew a church family I once served that was in tension between old-timers and newbies: the old-timers knew all the things that needed to be done and how it ought to be done and regularly criticized newer members when they did not fulfill the unspoken expectations of the church's tradition . . . Never mind that the old-timers did a bad job of communicating the tradition to the newcomers. And the newcomers never took much time in talking with the old-timers about the traditions . . . Each group had a tough time finding common ground and often pulled in different directions – a recipe for disaster! In that kind of scenario, an out-of-towner's car ends up further mired in the ditch with a bent frame and two very tired horses. . .

Our scriptures today, though different, end up in the same place.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians from a difficult personal place. He was in Rome awaiting trial before the Emperor. This was the trial that eventually condemned Paul to death for the seditious act of preaching the Lordship of Jesus Christ over that of the Emperor. Nero, the Emperor who set fire to Rome and blamed it on the Church was the one who signed Paul's death warrant. Against this backdrop – no small thing – Paul pleaded with the Christians in Philippi to present them-selves as a united front:

*"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one [person] for the faith of the gospel."<sup>ii</sup>*

Regardless of each one's standing or desire or need or situation, Paul was charging the church to be one and act as one. Paul knew there was so much out in the world that wanted to divide and separate the Church and its people that he knew its only hope was to find common ground.

Paul said to the Philippians, *"Pull Buddy, pull!"* But do it together, knowing each other, sharing the same spirit gifted them in Jesus.

When it comes to living our lives as servants of Jesus Christ we are either one or we are none – we are something he can use together, or we are nothing at all by ourselves.

In Jesus' parable from Matthew's gospel, we lose the point if we focus on the wages paid – although, in our material orientation we think the story patently unfair. How is it that those who work all day – as if working alone, for Pete's sake – are paid the same wage as the ones who work one hour in the cool of the day?

We think the accounting of the vineyard manager is nutty – even cruel! But as the preacher/author Robert Farrar Capon once said, *"If the world could have been saved by good bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses not Jesus."*<sup>iii</sup> Thank God it wasn't! By that exacting standard, none of us deserves the wages we receive. Even if we think we are the only ones pulling the load. . .

But the parable isn't about wages paid; it is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is easy to skip over that part to focus on the inherent injustice of the manager's pay scale.

Because it is about the Kingdom of Heaven, it is a story that is really about who God wishes to be included in his kingdom: old-timers and newbies, from the greatest to the least, from the hardest workers to those others we may think are slackers, but may have never really been given a proper to chance to work at all, or to their abilities.

As Peter DeGroot once said, *"Old timers in the Church will have to admit to a tendency to think that we have some special standing with God that 'newbies' do not have. It's as if there is a long period of building up seniority. The longer the seniority, the better is our standing with God. Not so says Jesus."*<sup>iv</sup>

*"Jesus is painting a picture for us of a manager who obviously isn't hiring people because of what they can do for him, but because of what he can do for them. Heaven is of such a nature that it wants all of us to be a part of it. Heaven consists of a heartfelt desire for the good*

*of others rather than our own good. If you are motivated primarily by a need to provide for yourself you won't be very comfortable in 'heaven'.*"<sup>v</sup> The requirement of heaven is grace-received and thanksgiving-rendered, nothing more and nothing less from each of us.

Think of it --

As the Rev. Barbara Beam writes,

*"If this is the kind of kingdom for which we pray, "thy Kingdom come," then it is up to us to help make it happen, insofar as it is possible, here on earth. What if we really forgave others their trespasses, in the knowledge that God forgives us, and them? What might happen if we stopped worrying about whether we were getting our fair share, or pulling all of the load and, instead, recognized each of our brothers and sisters as God's beloved child? What would be the results if we made ourselves available to be the instruments of God's love to these other children of God, not worrying about what they did or did not deserve, or what they did or didn't do? What if we would earnestly pray that God would show us how God wants to use us, and would listen, and would act? You know what? That's what the kingdom of heaven is like."*<sup>vi</sup>

So for the love of Jesus Christ and the kingdom he desires for each of you, contend as one person in this church, be of one mind and one spirit and for Christ's sake, "Pull Buddy, pull!" You can't do any less, but in his grace and with his love you can do so much more.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.preaching.com/sermon-illustrations/illustration-value-of-teamwork/> NOTE: This story is oft quoted without any attribution at all. I have lost track of my original source for this story, but I cite this website to underline the fact that this story is a commonplace. Incidentally, I am sure the tale is not original to this website.

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 1:27, NIV.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, "Kingdom, Judgment, Grace: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus," Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2002; p. 396.

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Degroote is a pastor and blogger. This particular quotation was from commentary on Matthew 20.

<sup>v</sup> The Rev. Sarah Buteux at

[http://firstchurchhadley.org/Firstchurchhadley/Eighteenth\\_Sunday\\_after\\_Pentecost\\_year\\_A.html](http://firstchurchhadley.org/Firstchurchhadley/Eighteenth_Sunday_after_Pentecost_year_A.html)

<sup>vi</sup> The Rev. Barbara Beam, Vicar of St. Nicholas Church, Noel, MO. See

<http://arc.episcopalchurch.org/sermons-that-work/020922sr.html>