

The One Who Began a Good Work in You

Philippians 4:7; Philippians 1:3-6

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

Susan Boyer

We are coming up on the season of Christmas when people will dust off their copies of "A Christmas Carol" – the most well-known story by Charles Dickens. But did you know that when Dickens died, he was in the process of writing a book called *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*? He was putting it out as a serial in a monthly magazine and had only published six of the anticipated twelve installments. It was a murder mystery and he left behind no detailed notes of the solution. We will never know who the murderer was, well according to Charles Dickens.

After Dickens died many, many others wrote endings to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. One man even claimed to have channeled Dicken's spirit in order to complete the book correctly. There have been theatre productions, even a musical comedy. There is a *Dr. Who* episode in which it is said that the killer was not a human being but blue creatures "not of this Earth."

It is fascinating to me that others felt compelled to write an ending to the story that Dickens began. Perhaps, even more people are intrigued by this book than if Dickens had actually completed it. That is intriguing isn't it. This unfinished story invites people to be part of it.

There is a parallel in that for me when I think about the Bible. Somedays, I think that the worst thing that happened to God's story is that we called it the Bible, slapped a back cover on it and called it finished. When we human beings created a council of men to decide what is worthy in God's story and what isn't, we put a period where there should have been a comma. The story of God and God's people was labeled complete. Now it appears that the totality of God's story is contained in a collection of 66 books and letters that most people consider obsolete. The Bible gathers dust on most of our shelves.

We like finished things. I fantasize about having a job stocking grocery shelves. As a pastor, I never stop at the end of the day, step back, look at what I have done and say, "Complete."

If you had to estimate how many projects you have around your homes that are "in progress", what would you guess? I have little cans of paint I have purchased to "try out" so I can choose the color for when I start painting my bedroom...sometime in the future. I still have the guitar Bryan was going to learn to play, a stack of books that were going to help Bryan learn to speak French or be faster at typing. I have a list of stories I want to write. The list just gets longer, and the stories haven't yet written themselves. Maybe you joined a gym but hardly ever went. Or bought watercolor paint but never

took it out of the box it came in. The average American has nine unfinished projects that are currently “in progress”. These incomplete projects can cause some anxiety. Our tendency is prefer things complete...finished....with a back cover on them.

In the month of October our church co-sponsored, along with the University of La Verne, a virtual series related to racial justice called, *Witnessing Whiteness*. In the very last session in that series, the co-leaders invited us to be aware of how we listen. They played three different segments for us in which we were supposed to simply be aware of how we listen...how our bodies respond to things we hear people say....things that may seem extreme to us. If we can learn to listen differently, we will actually hear things we have never heard before. And if we hear new things, we might respond differently.

One of the segments shared was an interview with a woman named Mariame Kaba, an activist and author working for prison abolition. She talked about the need to get rid of all systems of violence in our structures. My brain immediately went to hopelessness about this pie-in-the-sky statement. My initial internal thought was: “Wow. Like that is even possible?”. Then Kaba said, “I won’t see this change in my lifetime, but we need to organize towards a horizon without violence. Our job is to shorten the reach of these systems that harm. As we make small gains people will begin to see results.” As I listened differently, I heard something new....I heard a call in what she said...a call to actively work towards shortening the reach of harm....a call to walk and work towards a better horizon.

We live in a culture of rugged individualism and competition...and it is causing great harm. We don’t listen well to the stories of others. We think first and foremost about our own individual rights and opinions, and we often miss the call of collective responsibility.

All of those thoughts were circling around in my head as I read and re-read our scripture for today.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

I usually stop at Paul’s gratitude for this community at Philippi. He speaks so beautifully to them. “I thank my God every time I remember you,” he says. But Paul didn’t just shop in the greeting card section marked Thank You. He also shopped in the Love and Encouragement sections. He included all three of those in this letter. This was not a letter Paul wrote to be circulated among all the churches in the region, as happened with Ephesians and Galatians. This is a letter written specifically to the church at Philippi.

Paul was grateful for the community there. They didn’t just expect things of him. He had a mutual relationship with this church. Paul was in jail and in Paul’s time, this didn’t

mean three square meals a day. Food and care had to be provided by one's family or friends. Members of the church at Philippi stepped up and Paul's gratitude for their care, when he needed it most, ran deep.

When Paul wrote this letter from prison, he was aware that he might never see these friends again. What was foremost on his heart was gratitude, love and a desire to ask them to stay focused on the work they had begun together. "I am confident that the one who began a good work among you, will bring it to completion..."

There is that word....completion. But it is interesting to whom it is ascribed....the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion. Paul places the ownership for completion in the hands of God. Growing up a child of the Protestant Work Ethic has so shaped my identity. Maybe that is true for some of you, as well. My husband loved to say, "You Sterns have a go button but no stop button." I carry with me shame for anything I haven't completed well. It makes me anxious to take on any new project because I know I will feel driven until I feel it is "finished." If I don't think it is possible for me to complete it, I don't want to start it in the first place.

But when we listen to Mariame Kaba and the Apostle Paul we hear a different call. We don't have to complete it. We do need to start...to join in...to shorten the reach of harm...working side by side with others for the collective good. We aren't lone rangers in the gospel enterprise. We are a partnership walking towards the horizon of love.

In the 19+ years I have been here I have watched this church do that over and over again...most recently around racial justice. We have ancestors that made strides on that decades ago. In 2019, we picked up that mantel....that unfinished story....and with renewed fervor began walking again towards a horizon we might not live to see.

You did that thirty years ago as a small group of individuals in this congregation started to meet together wanting to shorten the reach of harm for LGBTQ members and friends of the La Verne Church of the Brethren. As they did others in this church saw what they were doing and joined with them...shortening the reach of harm in our denomination, community and then joining those in our country and world who had been working for equality their whole lives. I never ever thought I would live to see marriage equality for my gay son. I remember when I heard that the Supreme Court, on June 26, 2015, had granted same-sex couples in all 50 states the right to full, equal recognition under the law. I was on a bus on choir tour with members of this congregation...people who had been walking towards a horizon they didn't expect to live to see.

There may be some literalists among us that know that while we can reach the horizon for which we have yearned, there will be yet another horizon still beyond. We can get to the horizon of marriage equality but there will be a new horizon of love that beckons us. Even though we love the finished product. Even though we will try to do so over and over again, we can't build a tower to God or slap a back cover on the story of God or make our individual rights and opinions the end of the conversation.

But we can and must begin to shorten the reach of harm and the God who began a good work in us will see it through to completion. Until we trust God and God's faithfulness and presence, we will continue to think the whole gospel enterprise rests on our shoulders....that somehow we have to control the outcome. As you move through the coming months in this season of change in our church life and structure, may you join together moving towards a horizon of newness, trusting that the Spirit of God is alive and well among you...trusting that the One who began a good work in you remains ever present. Amen.