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Date: August 18, 2012
Sermon Title: David's 9th: What Church Should Be
Scripture: Exodus 17:8-13
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Exodus 17:8-13

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some men for us and go out; fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses's hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set. And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.

I am a news junkie. I can't wait to get up in the morning to see what's happened in the world to make my head spin. Or give me angina or agita. And with the elections upcoming, the news is filled with good stuff to chomp on. The problem for a preacher is how to use the good stuff without being partisan and turning off half the congregation.

A great example of that is the current kerfuffle over something the president said the other day when he said, in effect, "If you're a successful business person, you didn't build it by yourself." Everybody had fun with that, explaining or critiquing. That's sort of an age-old debate: are we really a nation of self-made men, great pioneers and entrepreneurs and visionaries, who forged rivers, carved through the mountains, conquered oceans, built cities, tamed the wild, all by ourselves? Or are we Team USA, "I've got your back, you've got mine"; "all for one, one for all"; a nation of barn raising and community suppers; E Pluribus Unum = out of many, one?

Not that long ago it was popular to say, "Behind every great man ... is a great woman." Hillary Clinton got into her own kerfuffle when she wrote a book called *It Takes a Village*. We prefer that idea of rugged individualism, every man for himself, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, self-made millionaire. We are all Paul Bunyans out there in the weeds, all by ourselves, transforming America!

So which is it? Are we all independent agents or team players? The debate reached a sort of funny, embarrassing apex this week on "The John Gambling Show." They were discussing President Obama's comment about "you didn't build it yourself," and they thought they had slam-dunked the president by appealing to the Olympic athletes. They went on and on about all those wonderful American athletes, heroes, who brought home the gold, and they had done it all by themselves. No help whatsoever.

"That's what America needs," they said, "men and women like the swimmers and the gymnasts and the runners and the wrestlers and the rowers, who achieved great success all by themselves. Yes, sirree. But before they can help themselves, they started talking about great coaches and facilities. And they were about to add great parents and siblings who made great sacrifices and the training facilities and the Olympic development teams and the endorsement deals and the friends and sponsors and donors. Perhaps even a word about teammates and trainers and the youth teams that got them started and the colleges that gave them scholarships.

Now, what got me to thinking about this was a delightful video that Beth Paul sent me a few weeks ago.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBaHPND2QJg>

I watched it on my computer and immediately said, "That's our stewardship campaign!" Seriously, I really did say that to myself. Every fall, around October, November, we have to figure out how to inspire 500 church families to do their part, their best, to support the ministry of this church. That's the curse of being a church pastor. Every fall, when the air is crisp, and the leaves turn beautiful, I automatically start thinking about the church budget. How to raise the funds, how to get all of our people involved, to do their best.

So I see this lovely, joyous, happy, inspiring video ... a little flash mob, producing Beethoven's 9th Symphony, starting with one lonely cello, building to a trio, a chamber, a full orchestra, and a choir. And immediately I see ... dollar signs! Forgive me. I'm just being honest. I saw dollar signs. I saw our church's annual pledge drive, our stewardship campaign. It starts slow. It

builds enthusiasm. Everyone gets involved. And the end result is smiles all around!

As I said, forgive me, because that's not the purpose of the video, that's not why you're in church today. But I couldn't help myself. I wanted to show it a couple of times in the fall, but once our windows are restored, our sanctuary is wonderfully full of light, and there's no way to show the video. Today is still a dark Sunday, so you get to see it. And it really is the key to any great church, any great effort. But today's sermon isn't about politics or about money. It's really about what we do together in comparison to what we do alone, apart, or divided.

The Scripture lesson was a peculiar one, wasn't it? It took place when the Israelites were escaping from slavery in Egypt. They were on the march to the Promised Land, a few hundred thousand of them. Now, we're on the Israelites' side. As Christians, we are the spiritual descendants of the Jews. The Exodus story is part of our story. Moses and the 10 Commandments. That's us. Plus, our sympathies are with the Israelites. They'd been slaves for 400 years, and now they were free, liberated, and chosen for God's greatness! That's how we see it. We're the good guys.

But look at it from the perspective of all the peoples and tribes and nations along the escape route. One day you look up, and there are a few hundred thousand people plowing through your town, trampling your rhododendrons, camping on your river, scaring the heck out of your dog, kicking up a dust storm. That's scary. Pretty menacing. So, naturally, those people got their armies and militia and attacked the Israelites.

Well, Moses puts his "Top Gun," Joshua, in charge of the Israelite army, and sends them into battle. Here's the deal. Moses had a magic stick, "the rod of the Lord," a long staff that God had blessed and Moses had used to convince Pharaoh to "Let my people go." People believed in the stick; it was a powerful symbol, much like the flag. You know, in "The Star-Spangled Banner," where it describes a terrifying battle: "the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there." That's how the Israelites felt about "the rod of the Lord." As long as they could see that rod, that stick, lifted up in the air, they were inspired to give it their all. So Moses stood up at the highest point around, with "the rod of the Lord" lifted high, and the soldiers fought valiantly, encouraged, emboldened.

For a while. You see, Moses was an old man. He grew weary. The "rod of the Lord" felt heavy, his arms got tired; and like it or not, he began to let his arms down, he let the stick down ... and the soldiers felt let down. Moses

couldn't do it all by himself. And the soldiers couldn't do it all by themselves. You can call it "silly" if you want, or "superstitious," or just plain un-American.

Maybe Moses should have been able to do it all by himself. Maybe the soldiers should have been able to do it all by themselves, no help from anyone, each man for himself. Totally self-reliant, rugged individualism on the battlefield no camaraderie, no buddies, no group effort, no teamwork, no larger purpose. Maybe that's the best way.

But the Bible doesn't think so. The Bible tells us folks wouldn't let Moses let down. They knew Moses was tired. They knew the burden was more than one man could handle alone. So they moved some boulders around, made a place for him to sit, put people, important people, key people, on his right and on his left (that's my political comment for the day: "important people on his right and on his left"), and they lifted up Moses's arms together on his right and his left (there is another political comment for the day: "together, on his right and his left"). And the nation, thanks to efforts on the right and the left, was victorious (yes, that's another political comment for the day: "thanks to the efforts on the right and the left, the nation was victorious").

Since I'm already toying with you, let me go on. I wonder what would have happened if only the right side was lifted up; just the right doing its job, nobody on the left ... I wonder how the battle would've gone? And if the battle got tough, so everybody switched to the left side, and the left side was lifted up, just the left side doing its job, nobody on the right ... I wonder how the battle would've gone?

Or, for that matter, in our little video today. I wonder how Beethoven's 9th would have sounded if just the one cello showed up. Or maybe one cello and a tuba.

I mentioned the Olympics a few minutes ago. There actually were some Olympians doing it alone. No program back in their home country. No support. No interest. No facilities. It was noble. Their effort was noble, certainly. Not victorious. Maybe we could try that at the next Olympics! No government support. No corporate support. They can practice on their own, buy their own tickets, fly over by themselves, maybe even sew their own uniforms — very noble.

But the Israelites weren't going for noble. They actually needed to beat Amalekites to get to the Promised Land. They actually needed to win, to be victorious, to be successful.

As I said, this sermon isn't about politics or raising money for the church. It just happens to be applicable to both! And to just about everything else in life.

I was up at Yale University today, even watched their football team practice. It really got me thinking! All that sharing and working together in cooperative effort. When the coach blew his whistle, everybody listened. They did calisthenics in sync. And the play itself is so ... so so much teamwork. All those offensive lineman, working so hard just to help the quarterback. And the quarterback, always giving the ball to somebody else, handing it to a halfback or tossing it to a tight end. And what do you make of this? Every time one team scores, they just kick it over to the other team and let them have a go at it!

Where is the rugged individualism, self-made men, each going his own way? What's more, most of them grew up playing on public fields, going to public schools, taught by tax-supported coaches. And all the best big-time football is played at state universities, where every school scholarship, every piece of tape, every helmet, every seat, every football comes from the government, comes out of my pocket and yours (I'm having fun with this, aren't I?)

It's too easy. We all know we need one another in just about everything. This church will sink if everybody doesn't do his or her part. That Beethoven's 9th will stink if that cello is left out there all by himself. This country will wear out like Moses if the right side and the left side don't both start helping the guy in the middle.

On Thursday, like dozens of our church families, Alida and I took a child to college. Andres has now completed 72 hours as a freshman at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. For those of us of a certain age, starting college was designed to be annoying, confusing, intimidating, backbreaking, humbling. No one helped you traverse anything. Every man for himself.

Even younger, I remember my first day at boarding school. An upper-classman tried to sell me a "radiator pass" for \$5, without which my dorm room radiator "wouldn't work." I argued him down to \$3, but when he wouldn't give me change, I belted him and got dragged off to the Dean's office. I'd been in prep school less than an hour, and I was in the Dean's office. I was too stupid to know I didn't need a "radiator pass," but I was smart enough to know that \$5 was too much.

I'm just saying in my day you were on your own, and it wasn't pretty. But at Andres's college, Hood College, it was smooth. It was fun, and it was easy. When we walked through the front door, a young woman met us

immediately, took us personally through each step of registration. At the door, soccer players in uniform helped carry the bags. Even the president of the college helped kids move in.

At 6 AM that morning, I had gone to the college to check it out, did my morning walk all over campus. At 6 AM the place was bustling with life, staff and students working together to get ready to welcome us. When I walked into the dining room, it was full of blue-shirted orientation staff, maybe 30 19-year-olds ... and I ... looking bewildered. They just grabbed me and invited me to sit with them for breakfast. By the end of the day, I was ready to stay and send Andres back here to preach.

All day long, at just the right time, whenever any of us started to get weary, suddenly, somebody was there on our left side and somebody else was there on our right side. And we were victorious.

Is life that simple? Yes. As I say all the time, I'm not saying things are easy. But for most of the things we deal with, it is simple.

Beethoven's 9th, football, this church, and daily life — they all go better together.