

“In Praise of Incompletion”

John 17:1-11 (Jesus completed his work; now it’s up to _____.)

Philippians 1:3-6

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Do you think that God has finished God’s work?

God’s not finished with me, that’s for sure. Well, not finished in that God needs to do a lot more work on me before I’m a completed work of art!

Our daughter took visual arts every semester from 7th grade through 12th, and I never got used to one aspect of her art teacher’s assignments and grading. The teacher made an assignment, for example, “Draw something that includes reflective surfaces such as mirrors, or shiny objects.” Then, on the day the assignment was due, Alexandra would *sometimes* head off to school with what looked to me like a partial drawing, an unfinished piece. I admit that the night before, I, more often than I would like to admit, would ask her if it were a “draft” that was due. She might reply, “No, the final drawing’s due.” Of course, she knew I asked the question because it didn’t seem to me that she had “completed” the work.

Not infrequently, when that happened, I’d see her working on that assignment a few months later. If I succumbed to asking another parental-type question, she would explain that she was working on the drawing for *another* assignment. The art teacher had given a new assignment, which was to continue to work on an earlier piece. One of my favorite drawings of hers I think fulfilled the criteria for “three” assignments before the drawing looked to me “finished.”

I’m not very proud of my interfering with her art projects, asking stupid parental questions that tended to convey **my not trusting her to complete her work** on time. After all, her history, math, and science assignments were completely done, on time. At least the ones I knew about!

The two passages of Scripture that we focus upon this morning both deal with **trust that work will be completed**. One tells of Paul’s trust in the completion of God’s work through people. Paul writes with confidence to the people in the town of Philippi. He is confident that the One who began a good work among them would bring it to completion ... In other words, Paul was being like Alexandra’s Art teacher, confident that the unfinished work of ministry in their town would be completed in due time.

Jesus, too, trusted that God’s work would be completed, though his task was a very different one from Paul. *Paul wrote a letter to people*, confident that the people would complete the work of God in their lives and community. *Jesus spoke a prayer to God*, confident that he had completed the work God had given to him to do on earth, even though for many observers—at the time and even now—Jesus’ work surely didn’t seem finished. Jesus prayed for himself, his disciples and the faith community. His deep prayer: that his joy would be made complete in them.

I highly encourage *you* to muse upon **the value of “completion”**—though, that is *not* an assignment. My musings upon finishing projects or leaving them unfinished have led me to think of God as a “Patient Perfectionist.” A “Patient” perfectionist is very different from merely a “perfectionist.” The key word—and idea—is “patient.” God may

be more like that art teacher, who *cares* about the completion of projects in our lives, but Whose time period is much longer than we might think.

Composer Franz Schubert wrote an “Unfinished Symphony.” In fact, Schubert’s piece of music is given that name, “Unfinished Symphony.” I understand the situation this way: Symphonies have, by definition, *four* movements. To be a symphony, a piece of music needs four movements. However, Schubert wrote two movements, and, for Schubert, the music was “finished.” Is it, then, a symphony? Or, is it something else? The conclusion was that it is a symphony, but an “unfinished” one, though it is a finished piece.

Imagine a child saying to her Dad, “I know I have an unfinished plate of food, but I’m done with it.” Okay, don’t imagine that.

Then muse upon your own life. Hear the injunctions that no doubt whisper into your ears, “Finish what you start,” “At least finish out your term in office,” “You can hang in there for another semester.” “It’s your duty to complete what you’ve agreed to.” “You’re half-way; keep going.”

Without any doubt, it is a virtue to finish what we start, to have fidelity to a purpose, to complete things. Completion is a virtue.

I would guess that many of us *fear* that if we do not complete some task, then we will be considered—by ourselves, by others, or even by God—as self-indulgent, slothful, lazy, uncommitted, a quitter, disloyal, or a loser. I agree, when we don’t complete something, someone very likely *will* consider us lazy or disloyal. **However that may not be a good enough reason to complete it!**

In two weeks our full slate of Sunday School teachers will start fulfilling their commitment to teach for a certain number of Sundays throughout the next 9 months. Our new and veteran teachers are very dedicated to children!

I was a 4-5-6th Grade Sunday School teacher for six years in Ohio. In the midst of those years, I was quite surprised by a certain reaction of other teachers. A number of Sunday School teachers felt apologetic because they had not “finished” the lesson for the day! They were volunteers who related well to children and who donated their time, yet they easily felt a little bit like a failure if some discussion in their Sunday School class pulled them away from finishing their lesson! Just imagine children so engaged that the teaching agenda was not completed! The children might remember those classes the very most!

Today we are *entertaining the possibility* of actually “praising” “incompletion.” The idea for this came to me from a fascinating article in the United Methodist devotional magazine *Weavings*. The woman who wrote the article is a Literature Professor at Westmont College.¹ She argues that finishing something out of “grim duty,” or “doggedness” is a questionable virtue. Remember Jesus spoke of JOY in his work and he prayed that others would continue in his JOY. This professor tells her college students, **“If something gives you pause, pause!” I love that: “If something gives you pause, pause!”**

Don’t get me wrong, I love the joy of completion! Sometime every week, I arrive at a sense of completion in relation to Sunday’s sermon. I love that feeling. It’s done!

However, there may be times in life that call for incompleteness. We discussed Schubert’s considering himself finished with his two-movement “symphony.” Though it is only two movements, when we hear it, it seems like a “complete” piece of music. What

if we didn't "finish" an argument? What if we quit our project of trying to get another to be just like we want? What if we didn't complete a war?

However, what if Beethoven had felt finished with his famous bar of music like this: dah dah dah ____ [Bill Brakemeyer/pianist plays the three notes]

We listeners would feel frustrated. It doesn't sound good. We would likely say, "Ludwig, you need to 'finish' it." I am using this silly example to point out that it is possible that someone *thinks* their project is finished, or they think that God has completed that work in them, but it does not seem completed to others and maybe not to God either.

Obviously, life situations are complex. They require discernment, musing, prayer.

1. How do *we* know when we should be like Schubert, spurn the opinions of others, and declare ourselves finished when *we think we are*?
2. When, on the other hand, might we "call it quits," regardless whether or not something seems "completed"?
3. And, when do we keep going, "hang in there, baby"?

A Sunday School child told her teacher, "God is an Artist." The teacher, willing to pay attention to the child even if it meant she didn't finish the lesson, put her curriculum aside for the moment and said, "How do you know?" The child said, "Because every Sunday we say, 'God, Who does Art in Heaven.'"

Well, I do think that God may be more like an Artist than an Engineer. God might consider **our life-projects** more like works of art than bridges. I really want engineers to finish bridges. I want them to complete their work before I drive over the bridge. It is essential that engineers complete their projects and finish them well. God may be like our daughter's Art Teacher, who, with extreme patience, knows that our life-projects take time and need the right timing to complete.

Jesus knew he was going to die. He believed he had completed what God needed him to do, but clearly there was still so much that God needed to have done in the world. What does Jesus do? He prays that his disciples and the brand new faith community carry on the work of God. He not only prays. He trusts that they will.

Paul, too, trusted people—the ones at Philippi—to complete the work of the Spirit.

You and I today indeed are still part of the JOY of this **completion process!**

¹ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, "In Praise of Incompletion," *Weavings* XX: July/August, 2005.