Collaboration

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 18, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.
Scriptures: Luke 10:1-11 and Mark 6:30-44
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Back in 1804, the conventional wisdom held that if you went to the headwaters of the Missouri River you would find a river that flowed west to the Pacific and that these two waterways could be a means of connecting the east and west coasts of the continent, enabling commerce across the land. President Thomas Jefferson selected his personal secretary, Meriwether Lewis, to lead the expedition tasked with finding this trans-continental watery highway. Lewis selected his old army buddy, William Clark, to be his co-leader, his partner. They would be co-commanders of the Corps of Discovery.

Things went fine – until they got to the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. They climbed to the top of the first ridge, expecting to find there the waterway that would carry their canoes over the rest of a range of the gentle slopes they'd expected. Of course, that's not what they found. What they saw, stretching out for hundreds of miles, as far as they could see, was high, craggy mountains, covered with snow. No river. No navigable waterway at all. They realized they had the wrong equipment for crossing this rugged mountain range. They had no idea what to do next in this unexpected landscape.

European trappers who had been in the area for year were unable to help them navigate their way across the mountains. The people who could help them were the indigenous people who had lived in the area for millennia. One trapper offered his wife, a Native American woman – a girl, really, just fifteen years old – who knew the mountains like the back of her hand. And so Sacagawea, the pregnant 15-year-old from a tribe that was feared and hated by Americans and Europeans alike, someone they had very little reason to trust, became their guide.

Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery never would have made it to the west coast without her. Like Lewis and Clark, we need collaborators to help us fulfill our missions, and sometimes that collaboration comes from unlikely places.

Jesus started his ministry by finding partners, collaborators in proclaiming the reign of God. When we think about the disciples, we generally think about the 12, Jesus' closest circle. Today's story of collaboration suggests that Jesus considered many more than the 12 to be his disciples. This reading starts with him sending out 72 disciples into the villages where he's going to go. These nameless disciples go out in pairs. They start their work with a partner, with a collaborator.

Jesus instructs them to carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. That seems like such a strange instruction to me. Maybe this is simply a lesson in trust. However, I think something more might be happening here. By going out without resources – no money, no bag of provisions, no sandals – they had to rely on the people in the towns and villages they went to. And by relying on the locals, the disciples gave the locals the opportunity to show hospitality. This leveled the playing field. The disciples weren't coming in as the outside

experts with the answers. They came as people with needs of their own. They came with their own vulnerability. And this created connections between the disciples and the villagers – connections that could lead to collaboration.

The disciples went to proclaim the good news and to bring healing, and so we may think that they came to serve. And by coming without provisions, they came to be served, too. Jesus warned them that some people wouldn't want to be collaborators. If they encountered that, just leave. Either way, the reign of God has come near. And when they found collaborators, all the better.

Something similar happens in the story of the feeding of the multitude. When the disciples tell Jesus that it's getting late and it's time for him to offer a benediction and send the people home so they can get something to eat, Jesus tells the disciples, "You give them something to eat." They bring him five loaves of bread and two fish. He accepts what they have and tells the disciples to have the crowd of thousands to sit in smaller groups of fifty or a hundred. They do that. Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, and then the disciples take over.

They found the little bit of food. *They* arrange the people in small groups, to face each other in a way that will encourage relationships, and sharing. *They* hand the food out to those grateful, hungry people. *They* collect the leftovers.

Jesus might have made more bread and fish out of the little offering from the disciples. Though he refused to turn stones to bread when he spent his 40 days in the desert immediately after his baptism, he might have done it for the crowd. If that happened, that would be a miracle.

It might also be that by putting the people in groups that were small enough that they could feel some connection with each other, the disciples set things up for collaboration. Maybe Jesus poured his power into the people, rather than stones and bread and fish. Maybe the miracle is that when the people saw the power of sharing, they started sharing, too. And, sure enough, if we all share, there really is enough for everyone. And if that happens, that, too, is a miracle.

Jesus found collaborators in his disciples and, I think, in the crowd of villagers who journeyed to the quiet place in the wilderness. Our congregation has history of collaboration, especially when it comes to our efforts to serve our neighbors. If you're willing to go back in time over half a century, you'll find Grace Draper and Mary Hewitt, members of predecessor congregations, First Christan Church of Fremont and Niles Congregational Church, collaborating to combat hunger in the most direct way possible: getting food to hungry people. Their efforts became Tri-City Volunteers.

They, of course, didn't do it alone. Collaboration was key to getting Tri-City Volunteers food bank off the ground, and then to expand. And once established, the collaboration didn't stop. In the mid-1980s, Tri-City Volunteers formed an official collaboration with the Alameda County Community Food Bank. Now, Tri-City Volunteers is the largest food bank in south Alameda County, serving somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people every month.

More recently, Tri-City Volunteers came back to Niles Discovery Church to form a collaboration to test out an idea to innovate the delivery of food to hungry people. Rather than making people come to a central food bank, Taylor Johnson (then Executive Director of Tri-City Volunteers) asked us to test out mobile pantries. Tri-City Volunteers got a truck to deliver food to where the hungry people lived. We supplied the initial drivers and schleppers to help Tri-City Volunteers test out the idea. It proved so successful, Tri-City Volunteers raised the money to purchase two more trucks and organize the needed volunteers.

The Tri-City Homeless Coalition – now Abode Services – was started thanks to a collaboration of religious organizations in the Fremont, Newark, and Union City. And Abode Services continues to work in collaboration with religious groups to help the unhoused and underhoused find stable housing.

When the City of Fremont announced they were thinking about opening housing navigation center, Niles Discovery Church was the first to step up and ask if we could collaborate with the City to make it happen. While we didn't end up being a formal collaborator, our advocacy helped shift the discussion in the city from whether a housing navigation center should be built to where it should be built.

And when the city formally organized the Safe Parking Program, Niles Discovery Church was among the first (and possibly the first) non-profit to collaborate as a parking venue. Last week we talked about the practice of compassion, about leaning on the love of God to enlarge the size and reach of our hearts.

Today, the invitation is to find your people. Compassion moves us to want to act. Collaboration empowers that action.

The news of the shooting at an elementary school in Bend three days ago has forced me to look at gun violence yet again. Something needs to be done, and it's clear that getting solutions adopted and implemented is an exceedingly difficult political task. The only way it will happen is if we build collaborations with individuals and organizations.

That's not surprising. It's true for every changemaker who wants to make a good and lasting impact – large or small – on the world. It gets done with other people, not alone.

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

Amen.