"Better Together"
Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 / Romans 12:4–13

Rally Day

Today is Rally Day. Labor Day has come and gone, and with it, summer has passed. The kids are back in school. People are finishing up their vacations and settling back into their regular routines.

Now, I know for many of you—especially those who are retired—these seasonal changes don't feel quite the same. Just this past Monday, on Labor Day, Carl Bishop Jr. sent me a text message that the church internet wasn't working, so he went ahead and wired it directly. I texted him, "Carl, are you laboring on Labor Day?" And he replied, "Now that I'm retired, every day is Labor Day!"

Since so many of our members are retired, the shift from summer to fall may not feel all that different. But Rally Day is here to remind us of something important: in our walk with God, there is no such thing as retirement. We never stop learning. We never stop growing. We never stop drawing closer to God. Rally Day isn't just about blessing the children as they head back to school. It's a day for all of us. A day to gather our hearts again. A day to recommit ourselves to God. A day to take another step toward maturity in faith.

Self-Transcendence

One of the most important parts of the Christian life is self-transcendence. Faith is never about staying the same. Faith is about discovering the will of the Creator God revealed in Jesus Christ. It's about reaching beyond our small selves, longing to be made new.

Think about Peter. He lived a steady life in a small Galilean fishing village. He had a wife. He worked with his brother catching fish. He kept God's commandments, worshiped on the Sabbath, and served in the synagogue. It was a good life. An ordinary life.

But then Jesus said two words: *Follow me.* And those two words turned his life upside down. For three years he followed the Lord—hearing His teaching, witnessing His miracles. And through that time Peter discovered something greater than comfort: God's calling. He gave himself to that call. And he was transformed—from a fisherman into a fisher of people, from an ordinary man into the rock of the church. That's what faith does. Transformation. Self-transcendence. And every one of us here carries that same desire—to grow, to be changed, to walk the journey of becoming new.

Of course, there are powers and habits that pull us back. The Bible calls it sin. And sin's pull can feel like a black hole. Have you ever felt that pull? It's strong. Hard to resist.
But by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can turn our hearts to God. We can step toward a holier life. Methodists have a word for that journey: sanctification.

And in this journey of sanctification, what matters most is a humble spirit. A willingness to learn. A hunger for truth. And the courage to live that truth—so that God's saving grace is not just something we know, but something we embody. Something we live.

There are two phrases that simply don't fit the Christian life. One is, *"I'm a non-practicing Christian."* The other is, *"I'm spiritual but not religious."* I'm sure you've heard people say these before. But if someone claims, "I believe in God," while never coming to church and never practicing their faith, that isn't true belief in God. It's only belief in the idea of believing. Faith is life. And there is no such thing as a Christian without the desire and the effort to be changed.

Christians also can't be "spiritual but not religious." The Latin word for religion is *religio.* One meaning is "careful observance of divine rites and rituals." Another is "to bind fast"—to be bound to God in faith and devotion. So being "religious" means two things: faithfully practicing worship and ritual as precious means of God's grace, and at the same time, being bound to God in trust and devotion.

Now, some people think rituals are empty routines. But they're not. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han reminds us: outward rituals shape our inner lives. And I believe he's right. I'll never forget a visit to Washington, D.C. with my mother in 2013. We toured the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception—the largest Catholic church in America. The building was massive, filled with mosaics and statues. But what struck me most wasn't the art or the architecture. It was the monks.

In the lower chapel, as monks came and went, each one paused before the crucifix. They bent down, reverently bowing toward the cross—when they entered, and again when they left. A simple ritual. But through it, I felt the holiness of that place. That's the power of ritual. The outward forms we practice shape our inner lives. When we gather to worship, when we pray together, when we share the bread and the cup, these aren't just symbols. They renew us from the outside in. They bind us to God. And they bind us to one another. No one has ever walked the journey of faith alone. No one can. God's kin-dom is revealed and found in our shared worship, our rituals, and our life together as the body of Christ.

Better Together

That's why being together matters. The writer of Ecclesiastes says, *"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either falls down, one can help the other up. But pity the one who falls and has no one to help them up."*

That's the life of faith. We don't walk it alone—we walk it together. And that's what Rally Day is all about. So what's the most important thing we do on Rally Day? We come together. Just by being here today, you've already done the most important thing. Even the word "Rally" means gathering, rallying as a church family, starting a new season united in mission and purpose.

My dear Asbury family, the very fact that we are here together is grace. When we walk alone, it's easy to stumble. But when we walk together, we lift each other up. As Paul writes in Romans, though we are different, we are one body—building each other up and binding ourselves together in love. That's the grace of being *Better Together.*

So as we begin this new season, let us keep learning until the day we stand before God. Let us keep praying for one another. Let us keep walking this road of faith side by side. And let us not give up gathering together in the church, but encourage one another—so that more and more people may join us in worship and life together.

I believe God will use our church that walks together to be salt and light in the world. Together, all things are possible. Together, life is beautiful. Together, we experience the kingdom of God. Better Together—that is God's gift and God's grace for us today.