

2021 Lenten Study – Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* (Apart)

Week 1 – Community

Welcome to the first session in our Lenten Book Study. We’ll be looking at Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, *Life Together*, which contains his thoughts about, and guidance for, Christians living in community. We’ll see what this small but powerful volume might have to teach us after almost a year living more or less separated. What does Christian community look like when we’re all quarantined and can’t gather together? And how can Bonhoeffer’s experiences and teachings guide us when we finally do get to come back together once more?

Hopefully you can find access to a copy of this book. It is available for purchase online through a variety of retailers and booksellers, and it is probably also available through your local public libraries, or as an e-book. A few excerpts will be provided in this guide, but you are encouraged to pick up a copy for yourself and read the introduction and Chapter 1. All citations below come from the Harper San Francisco edition, copyright 1954. Page numbers are cited in parentheses. Some of the discussion questions are adapted from a study guide by Rev. Dr. Craig Nesson from Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

We begin by sharing the first verse of a hymn written by Bonhoeffer, “By Gracious Powers,” (ELW #626), as our opening prayer:

By gracious pow'rs so wonderfully sheltered,
and confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning,
and never fails to greet us each new day.

And here is a short biography of Bonhoeffer from his commemoration day on April 9th: Bonhoeffer (BON-heh-fer) was a German theologian who, at the age of twenty-five, became a lecturer in systematic theology at the University of Berlin. (He also studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he was influenced both by it being a place of “free discussion” and by the African American struggle for equality.) In 1933, and with Hitler’s rise to power, Bonhoeffer became a leading spokesman for the Confessing Church, a resistance movement against the Nazis. He was arrested in 1943. He was linked to a failed attempt on Hitler’s life and sent to Buchenwald, then to Schönberg prison. After leading a worship service on April 8, 1945, at Schönberg prison, he was taken away to be hanged the next day. His last words as he left were, “This is the end, but for me the beginning of life.”

The first thing Bonhoeffer wants to say about Christian community is what a privilege it is to have it: “It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work. ‘The Kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and

lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared?" (Luther)." (17-18)

Bonhoeffer says that God scattered Christians throughout the earth. One day they will be gathered together again. "Until then, God's people remain scattered, held together solely in Jesus Christ, having become one in the fact that, dispersed among unbelievers, they remember *Him* in the far countries." (18) Bonhoeffer speaks at length about the joy and value of being in community, and how easy it is to disregard that gift when we have access to it all the time.

- What aspects of community have you been able to maintain in this past year of pandemic?
- What aspects of community had you taken for granted before this?
- Do you feel like you are "in the midst of enemies?" Has an enemy ever become a friend?

Here is one of Bonhoeffer's foundational points: "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this...We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.

"What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity." (21)

Bonhoeffer says that Christ is communicated to us by other human beings, and that we communicate Christ to others, too. "Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's word to him...The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain; his brother's is sure.

"And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God permits them to meet together and gives them community." (23) Salvation can only come from God, from outside of us; but that word of grace gets communicated through human beings; so, community comes through Christ, and our need for Christ. Christ is our model for relationships. We learn how to treat others by how God treats us. When you see another person, you have to see them as someone Christ loves, someone Christ died for. What determines our community is what that other person is by reason of Christ. "Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us." (25). When you look at someone in community with you, you are seeing someone you are eternally united with through Jesus Christ.

- Do you approach your relationships at church as though Christ was mediating each of them? In other words, is Christ the foundation of the relationships in our community? Do you see and treat each other through cross-shaped lenses?

Bonhoeffer spends a lot of time talking about the difference between community as an "ideal" and as a "divine reality." "One who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian" community. You're just looking for some extraordinary social experience which you haven't found elsewhere, and bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian community. (26) You're always looking for "something more."

Bonhoeffer does not pretend that living in Christian community is easy, or free from sin or conflict. Remember – he was a pastor and seminary leader in the resistance church during the Nazi regime in Germany. But he shares this perspective: “Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what He has done for us.” (28) Even having sinful brothers and sisters is a chance to give thanks to God for our forgiveness and the chance to forgive and reconcile with them. “If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ.” (29).

To sum up: Christian community is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. (30)

- Bonhoeffer’s description of a basic, in-and-through-Christ, forgiving community almost seems like a pipe dream. Have you ever experienced something like what he describes?
- What makes you want to be a part of a Christian community?
- Have you ever complained about church not being the way you expect it to be? Have you ever complained about other members of the church? What does Bonhoeffer’s contrast between ideal and divine reality change about your outlook on things?
- Do you have any tendencies to make demands about how the church ought to be rather than being grateful for what the Christian community really is?
- Instead of just getting “back to normal” as quickly as possible when we can get back together again, how can we come back together into the divine reality we’ve already been given? What opportunities are in front of us?

In the last section of this chapter, Bonhoeffer talks about the difference between the Christian community being a “spiritual reality,” based on Christ, and not a “human reality,” based on, well humans. He says that, for good or ill, human relationships end up being about binding of one to the other, or exercising power over another. Even the best of intentions ends up being less than holy (See 1 Corinthians 13:3). Relationships based on a spiritual reality are mediated by Christ. “Human love makes itself an end in itself. It creates of itself an end, an idol which it worships, to which it must subject everything. It nurses and cultivates an ideal, it loves itself, and nothing else in the world. Spiritual love, however, comes from Jesus Christ, it serves him alone...” (35) Spiritual love does not desire, it serves.

Two more quotes: “Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all...Therefore, spiritual love proves itself in that everything it says and does commends Christ.” (36) Christian community therefore, goes like this: “We are bound together by faith, not by experience.” (39)

- Ponder your Christian relationships, ponder the community at Messiah – how does it measure up to Bonhoeffer’s contrast between human love and spiritual love? When you see each other in the flesh again, will you see the image of Christ in one another? I know that I have a tendency to see in others (in my family, my friendships, in strangers) how I think they *should* be. How can we make Christ the starting place for our community?

Please take some time to read through this chapter and ponder these questions. If you have questions, insights, or responses of your own, please share!

I’m hopeful that the next session, on chapter 2, “The Day with Others,” can be a Zoom session. Stay tuned for a start time and link to be emailed out. We’ll start by talking a little bit about our final takeaways on chapter 1, and then dive in to chapter 2.