

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

Week 2 – The Day with Others

Welcome to the second session in our Lenten Book Study. We are 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. 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 second verse of a hymn written by Bonhoeffer, “By Gracious Powers,” (ELW #626), as our opening prayer:

Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
oh, give our frightened souls the sure salvation,
for which, O Lord, you taught us to prepare.

Last week we talked about how community for Christians is only in Christ and through Christ. Only in and through Christ can we have an authentically Christian fellowship, and that “in and through” is the basis for all we do and how we see each other and how we treat each other. Bonhoeffer cautioned against striving for an “ideal” of community based on human expectations, and rather encouraged his readers to live into the divine reality of community that God has already provided in and through Christ.

As begin the second chapter, recall that Bonhoeffer wrote this book in part for the “underground” seminary he was leading during the Nazi regime in the late 1930s and early 1940s. His first inspiration and audience was a group of men living together covertly, training to become ministers in the Confessing Church. So: not quite a monastery, but there might be some things that kind of sound that way. In general, though, this chapter gives some practices and structures to take the “in and through Christ” philosophy and put it into visible, tangible daily living.

Bonhoeffer starts, naturally, at the day’s beginning. He talks about how much we, in modern times, take for granted that the sun comes up each morning. In more ancient times, including biblical times, the fact that the sun rose each day was truly something to marvel at and be thankful for. He encourages us to give such thanks and praise to God to begin each day, and gives many examples from Scripture to support this. The main focus of this chapter, though, is

the daily devotional worship he recommends starting each day with, consisting of Scripture (especially the Psalms), singing hymns, and praying.

“For Christians the beginning of the day should not be burdened and oppressed with besetting concerns for the day’s work. At the threshold of the new day stands the Lord who made it. All the darkness and distraction of the dreams of night retreat before the clear light of Jesus Christ and his wakening Word. All unrest, all impurity, all care and anxiety flee before him. (43)

- Did your family growing up start the day with prayer or praise?
- Do you now? If so, in what way? Is it the *first* thing? (Even before reading the news or eating breakfast?)
- When have you felt joy upon waking?
- How can Messiah start our non-Sundays together in prayer and praise?

The next section takes a fascinating detour into “The Secret of the Psalter.” The Psalms are “the church’s first hymnbook”; in fact, Hymns #1-150 in our hymnal the ELW, are the Psalms. Psalms are a wonderful resource for daily prayer and devotion. Bonhoeffer takes some time to explain how the Psalms can be both the Word of God and our prayer to God. Because Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, when we pray the Psalms, they are our prayer through Christ. The Psalms include everything in the human experience, but also things – like the psalms of suffering, lament, innocence, or the imprecatory songs (read Psalm 137 for some extreme anger and bitterness) – that we can only pray through the body of Christ. Jesus suffered. Jesus was innocent. Jesus took on all of human imprecation to redeem it. And by praying through the Psalms, it helps us tap into both our Lord Jesus and the other members of the body of Christ and the Psalms *they* might be praying. In other words, it helps us maintain a community that is in Christ and through Christ.

“The Psalter is the vicarious prayer of Christ for his Church. Now that Christ is with the Father, the new humanity of Christ, the Body of Christ on earth, continues to pray his prayer to the end of time. This prayer belongs, not to the individual member, but to the whole Body of Christ...Even if a verse or a psalm is not one’s own prayer, it is nevertheless the prayer of another member of the fellowship; so it is quite certainly the prayer of the true Man Jesus Christ and his Body on earth.

“In the Psalter we learn to pray on the basis of Christ’s prayer. The Psalter is the great school of prayer.

“Here we learn, first, what prayer means. It means praying according to the Word of God, on the basis of promises...Second, we learn from the prayer of the psalms what we should pray.” (46-47)

- How familiar are you with the Psalms?
- Do you have a favorite Psalm? Is there a Psalm or type of Psalm that you struggle with?
- If there are types of psalms – like the lament and suffering psalms – that aren’t part of your experience, or at least not on the same depth, do they still give you an insight into brothers and sisters in Christ who *do* pray them from personal experience?

“Third, the psalms teach us to pray as a fellowship. The Body of Christ is praying, not as an individual one acknowledges that his prayer is only a minute fragment of the whole prayer of the church. He learns to pray the prayer of the Body of Christ. And that lifts him above his personal concerns and allows him to pray selflessly.” (48-49) Many Psalms are written in a style that repeats the same statement with slightly different words; Bonhoeffer says that this points to the fact that, even when by ourselves, the call-and-response style shows we are never praying alone.

Which brings us to the next section, on reading the Scriptures. Daily devotions based on just a verse or two are ok, Bonhoeffer says; but it’s better to read whole chapters and chunks of Scripture. (Check out the daily prayers from the Moravian church – they are wonderful!) Here’s why Bonhoeffer thinks so:

“As a whole the Scriptures are God’s revealing Word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, in the connection of Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived.” (51)

“Consecutive reading of Biblical books forces everyone who wants to hear to put himself, or to allow himself to be found, where God has acted once and for all for the salvation of men. We become a part of what once took place for our salvation... We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth. There God dealt with us, and there He still deals with us, our needs and our sins, in judgment and grace. It is not that God is the spectator and sharer of our present life, howsoever important that is; but rather that we are the reverent listeners and participants in God’s action in the sacred story, the history of the Christ on earth. And only in so far as we are *there*, is God with us today also.

“A complete reversal occurs... Our salvation is “external to ourselves.” I find no salvation in my life history, but only in the history of Jesus Christ.” (53-54)

Bonhoeffer says that reading the Bible this way takes work; it takes time; it takes commitment. We will be reminded of how much we *don’t* know, therefore making us turn to God all the more. Immersing in the Scriptures and the connections among them once again establishes our community in Christ and through Christ, and affects how we relate to others in our community who are also being shaped by Scripture.

To sum up: reading the Bible will help us see and treat each other in more Christ-like ways, and will help us align with God’s will more and more. Who’d’ve thunk it?

- When you engage in daily devotions, do you read short passages or verses, or longer chapters and sections, or some of both?
- Have you ever met someone who said they didn’t feel comfortable going to a Bible study because they didn’t know enough about the Bible? How do we un-intimidate the Bible for ourselves and others, and invite folks into the bigger story of God’s salvation? (It’s good to have a daily reminder of how much we *don’t* know. 😊)
- Where are you in God’s story these days? Or – what stories or themes or people in the Bible are you especially relating to right now?

- How has Scripture changed your perspective/focus/lens/priorities in life? How have others' experiences with Scripture had an effect on you when you combine your prayers and devotions?

Bonhoeffer rounds out his plan for the opening of each day by talking about singing and praying together. He recounts how many songs there are in the Bible, a model for our own singing. He talks about how songs convey our feelings and prayers and praise in ways that mere words cannot: "The heart sings because it is overflowing with Christ. That is why all singing in the church is a spiritual performance." (58)

"Why do Christians sing when they are together? The reason is, quite simply, because in singing together it is possible for them to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because here they can unite in the Word." (59)

"The more we sing, the more joy will we derive from it, but, above all, the more devotion and discipline and joy we put into our singing, the richer will be the blessing that will come to the whole life of the fellowship from singing together.

"It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the church, may share in its song." (61)

- When do you sing (in general)?
- When do you sing hymns?
- Why do you sing?
- What do you think about Bonhoeffer's advice on "destroyers of unison"? (I would beg to differ, myself.) What about "all God's creatures got a place in the choir"? Thoughts?

When it comes to prayer, Bonhoeffer says this: "There is no part of common devotions that raises such serious difficulties and trouble as does common prayer, for here we must ourselves begin to speak. We have heard God's Word, and we have been permitted to join in the hymn of the Church; but now we are to pray to God as a fellowship, and this prayer must really be *our* word, *our* prayer for this day, for our work, for our fellowship, for the particular needs and sins that oppress us in common, for the persons who are committed to our care." (62)

This means that the person praying needs to be attuned to the needs and goings-on of their community, whether that's the family members in their house, the members of a prayer group, or the whole congregation. The operative word is "common": common petitions, common thanks, common intercessions. For "Life Together," the prayers and devotions are all about the community that is in Christ and through Christ. Individual prayers have their place; but not in this particular setting. He also recommends praying on one's own, as opposed to using pre-written prayers. The latter are ok, but the former are better. The prayers should be spoken out loud, with the community, but he says not to get nervous or concerned about how your prayer "sounds": "Here the poorest mumbling utterance can be better than the best-formulated prayer." (65).

- What experiences do you have with praying out loud? In a group?
- In what ways do you pray for your family? For Messiah?

- How do you stay connected so that you know what the content of the common prayers should be?

This is a long chapter! But that gets us through the morning devotions. That's how important Bonhoeffer thinks it is to start every day grounded and immersed and connected to God, and through Christ, with one another. He concludes the chapter with some brief sections on table prayers, the day's work, and noonday and evening prayers.

For table prayers, he says to treat every meal like a joyful, festive, thankful, mini-sabbath.

- How do you feel when you eat a meal?
- It what ways do you "say grace"?

For the day's work, Bonhoeffer says that the prayer frames your work day, and that your workday provides the content of prayers. Personally, I feel like it doesn't have to be one or the other; you could pray throughout the day in various ways (go back to all the prayer class videos!). But he does present an intriguing proposition: how can your daily work be in itself an expression of prayer?

- Do you feel a difference or separation between the "it world" and the "prayer/God world"?
- How does prayer or devotional time sustain you throughout the work of the day?

"The organization and distribution of our time will be better for having been rooted in prayer. The temptations which the working day brings with it will be overcome by this break-through to God. Decisions which our work demands will be simpler and easier when they are made, not in the fear of men, but solely in the presence of God...Our strength and energy for work increase when we have prayed God to give us the strength we need for our daily work." (71)

Finally, Bonhoeffer encourages devotional time during lunch, if you are able to eat together, and again at dinner. He also recommends another round of devotion after dinner, before bed, so that the last act of the day is also one of worship and devotion, asking God to protect you through the night. He says that this is the appropriate time for prayers asking for forgiveness after the sins and hurts of the preceding day. "It is a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that every dissension that the day has brought must be healed in the evening. It is perilous for the Christian to lie down to sleep with an unreconciled heart."

Here is part of the prayer of confession from the ELW's night (compline) prayer:

I confess to God Almighty,
 before the whole company of heaven,
 and to you, my brothers and sisters,
 that I have sinned by my own fault
 in thought, word, and deed.
 I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me,
 forgive me all my sins,
 and bring me to everlasting life.
Almighty and merciful God

**grant you healing, pardon,
and forgiveness of all your sins. Amen.
I confess to God Almighty,
before the whole company of heaven,
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have sinned by my own fault
in thought, word, and deed.
I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me,
forgive me all my sins,
and bring me to everlasting life.
Almighty and merciful God
grant you healing, pardon, and
forgiveness of all your sins. Amen.**

Like I said, this was a really long chapter, and it might have been tough to make it all the way through. Like I said at the beginning, the idea is that this chapter gives us concrete practices to put into practice the spiritual lens of “community in Christ and through Christ” from chapter 1: reading God’s Word, praying the Psalms as Christs’ prayers, singing the Church’s hymns, and offering up *common* prayers. If you didn’t finish the whole thing, please take some time to read through it and ponder the discussion questions I’ve included and your own. If you have questions, insights, or responses of your own, please share!

The next chapter is “The Day Alone.” Stay tuned for a link to next week’s Zoom session and we’ll see how it’s different than “The Day with Others.” Peace be with you!