

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

### Week 3 – The Day Alone

Welcome to the third 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 third verse of a hymn written by Bonhoeffer, “By Gracious Powers,” (ELW #626), as our opening prayer:

And when this cup you give is filled to brimming  
with bitter suff’ring, hard to understand,  
we take it thankfully and without trembling  
out of so good and so beloved a hand.

Last week we talked about “the day with others.” Bonhoeffer laid out the importance of starting each day with God, in devotion, with your community (family, congregation, etc.), sharing together in scripture, singing hymns, and prayer. He shared tangible ways in which to live in community in Christ and through Christ. This week, we get the other side of the devotional coin, talking about personal devotions, meditation, and prayer in “The Day Alone.” As we will see, though, these practices too have to do with living in community, in Christ and through Christ.

Right out of the gate Bonhoeffer hits us readers with the following: “Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people. There are Christians, too, who cannot endure being alone, who have had some bad experiences with themselves, who hope they will gain some help in association with others. They are generally disappointed. Then they blame the fellowship for what is really their own fault. The Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium. The person who comes into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion, no matter how spiritual this diversion may appear. He is really not seeking community at all, but only distraction which will allow him to forget his loneliness for a brief time, the very alienation that creates the deadly isolation of man. The disintegration of communication and all genuine experience, and finally resignation and spiritual death are the result of such attempts to find a cure.” (76-77)

Wow! This seems really harsh. But is there truth in it? Within the whole arc of this book, it makes sense, despite seeming pretty bleak. You might remember from chapter 1 that Bonhoeffer said not to look for a human ideal in the Christian community, but rather the divine reality that is already there for us. If we look for our human needs to be met in Christian community, we're going to encounter other sinners like ourselves and it won't go well. If, however, we embrace the fact that every member of the community is loved by Christ and that Christ died for them, and that this community gives us the chance to enact grace, especially when others sin...well, that's different.

In the framework of this book, if community is in Christ and through Christ, your true needs *will* be met and taken care of, in and through Christ, by loving others, in and through Christ. It comes down to your motives, Bonhoeffer is saying, and your expectations.

- How does this opening paragraph reconcile with a congregation being a place of welcome and sanctuary?

The opening section of this chapter is called "Solitude and Silence," and Bonhoeffer offers these two contradictory yet complementary phrases: "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community...Let him who is not in community beware of being alone." (77).

When I conduct premarital counseling, I sometimes have to remind the individuals in the couple that they need to be ok sometimes being by themselves, and letting their partner be by themselves, for a relationship to last. That means being assertive about your own needs; genuinely listening to your partner's needs; and taking time for your own pursuits and friends that is separate from what you do together as a couple. Bonhoeffer's two "beware's" made me think of this advice. A community is made up of individuals, so you attend to the needs of both the whole and the parts.

- How have you balanced community and solitude in this past year of pandemic? Have you had *too* much of either? Either in general or with regards to the Messiah community?

If the last chapter dealt with how to tend to a community as a whole, this chapter is about the individual. Bonhoeffer lifts up the importance of silence as an act of being present to the Word of God, an act of listening, response, attentiveness, and reflection:

"The mark of solitude is silence, as speech is the mark of community. Silence and speech have the same inner correspondence and difference as do solitude and community. One does not exist without the other. Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech." (78)

"As there are definite hours in the Christian's day for the Word, particularly the time of common worship and prayer, so the day also needs definite times of silence, silence under the Word and silence that comes out of the Word. These will be especially the times before and after hearing the Word. The Word comes not to the chatterer but to him who holds his tongue." (78-79)

“Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under the Word of God. We are silent before hearing the Word because our thoughts are already directed to the Word... We are silent after hearing the Word because the Word is still speaking and dwelling within us. We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God...

“Silence is nothing else but waiting for God’s Word and coming from God’s Word with a blessing. But everybody knows that this is something that needs to be practiced and learned, in these days when talkativeness prevails.” (79)

- In this age of “talkativeness” – smartphones, social media, and endless “breaking news” and commentary, do you experience the kind of silence Bonhoeffer is describing?

“But this stillness before the Word will exert its influence upon the whole day. If we have learned to be silent before the Word, we shall also learn to manage our silence and our speech during the day... The silence of the Christian is listening silence, humble stillness, that may be interrupted at any time for the sake of humility. It is silence in conjunction with the Word.” (79-80)

This following seems to be particularly relevant to those who have been stuck mostly inside together for a year: “Where a family lives close together in a constricted space and the individual does not have the quietness he needs, regular times of quiet are absolutely necessary. After a time of quiet we meet others in a different and a fresh way. Many a household fellowship will be able to provide for the individual’s need to be alone, and thus preserve the fellowship itself from injury, only by adopting a regular order.” (80)

- Has this been the case for your household under quarantine?
- In what ways do you accept the gift of “silence” when it comes to the Word?
- Have you ever held your tongue and reaped the benefits? Or the opposite?

The next section gets into the practices of Christian solitude (defined as being alone with the Word) through meditation, prayer, and intercession. The practice of individual meditation on the Scriptures is first and foremost. In contrast to the community devotions, where Bonhoeffer encouraged reading whole chapters or chunks of the Bible, as an individual you are invited to reflect on a single passage, or verse, or even word, perhaps even the same thing for a number of days in a row. The text should come across in an almost sacramental way: what is the Word offering *for you*? What is the Word saying personally to you?

This gets back to the nature of silence, waiting before and after the Word. “Often we are so burdened and overwhelmed with other thoughts, images, and concerns, that it may take a long time before God’s Word has swept all else aside and come through. But it will surely come, just as surely as God Himself has come to men and will come again.” (82)

Bonhoeffer then gets it to what we should and shouldn’t expect to receive from meditation, including: “It is not necessary, therefore, that we should be concerned in our meditation to

express our thought and prayer in words. Unphrased thought and prayer, which issues only from our hearing, may often be more beneficial.

“It is not necessary that we should discover new ideas in our meditation...As Mary ‘pondered in her heart’ the things that were told by the shepherds, as what we have casually overheard follows us for a long time, sticks in our minds, occupies, disturbs, or delights us, without our ability to do anything about it, so in meditation God’s Word seeks to enter in and remain with us. It strives to stir us, to work and operate in us, so that we shall not get away from it the whole day long. Then it will do its work in us, often without our being conscious of it.

“Above all, it is not necessary that we should have any unexpected, extraordinary experiences in meditation. This can happen, but if it does not, it is not a sign that the meditation period has been useless.” (83)

Maybe think of it this way: is there a loved one in your life that has passed away, that you wish you could still just call and talk to? You may have talked them every week, every day...not every conversation may have led to a huge epiphany or new information. You spoke every day to maintain the relationship, and because you wanted that time together. We can approach our daily time with the Word in the same way. If it’s hard to think of what you get out of reading the Bible, maybe think about what you’d miss without it.

- What are your expectations when you meditate on a passage?
- Have you ever felt “spiritual dryness and apathy, an aversion, even an inability to meditate” (83)?
- How does your time of personal devotion and meditation affect your day? Does it?
- Many people take part in personal devotions. How could we balance that with congregational devotions? How would we encourage everyone to participate, for the good of the community? How do we as a congregation build each other up when we can get back together, through devotion and prayer, both together and as individuals?

Meditation on Scripture leads to prayer: “According to a word of Scripture we pray for the clarification of our day, for preservation from sin, for growth in sanctification, for faithfulness and strength in our work. And we may be certain that our prayer will be heard, because it is a response to God’s Word and promise.” (85)

And then Bonhoeffer offers some advice and grace with regards to prayer: “It is one of the particular difficulties of meditation that our thoughts are likely to wander and go their own way, toward other persons or to some events in our life. Much as this may distress and shame us again and again, we must not lose heart and become anxious, or even conclude that meditation is really not something for us. When this happens it is often a help not to snatch back our thoughts convulsively, but quite calmly to incorporate into our prayer the people and the events to which our thoughts keep straying and thus in all patience return to the starting point of the meditation.” (85) (I encourage you to look up “centering prayer” as a possible spiritual practice to try out.)

The third purpose of solitude is intercession. The community prays for its members; the individual prays for those in his or her circle who have asked for your prayers or who you know

that needs prayers. Especially consider here praying for your enemies or those who simply rub you the wrong way. Because...

“This brings us to a point at which we hear the pulsing heart of all Christian life in unison. A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others.” (86)

“How does this happen? Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the Cross of Jesus as a poor human being and sinner in need of grace. Then everything in him that repels us falls away; we see him in all his destitution and need. His need and his sin become so heavy and oppressive that we feel them as our own, and we can do nothing else but pray...” (86)

This seems to crystallize a lot of Bonhoeffer’s teaching in this book. And so I simply ask:

- Who do you pray for?
- How has praying for someone else changed how you relate to them?

Finally, Bonhoeffer talks about “The Test of Meditation.” Has your time of scripture meditation prayer, and intercession “transported him for a moment into a spiritual ecstasy that vanishes when everyday life returns, or has it lodged the Word of God so securely and deeply in his heart that it holds and fortifies him, impelling him to active love, to obedience, to good works?”

“The individual must realize that his hours of aloneness react upon the community... We *are* members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence. Every member serves the whole body, either to its health or to its destruction.” (88-89)

- How have your “hours of aloneness” tallied at different stages or circumstances in your life?

Thanks for pondering this book! Please take some time to 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 “Ministry.” Stay tuned for a link to next week’s Zoom session. Peace be with you!