

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

Week 4 – Ministry (Service)

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:

Yet when again in this same world you give us
the joy we had, the brightness of your sun,
we shall remember all the days we lived through
and our whole life shall then be yours alone.

Last week we talked about “the day alone.” Bonhoeffer talked about the ins and outs of personal devotional time, lifting up scriptural meditation, prayers, and intercessions as ways to ground yourself in the Word of God every day, so that the Word could then affect you and work through you throughout your day’s work and interactions. This week, we move back to the practical application of how the communal and individual time of worship, prayer, and devotion covered in the last two chapters is lived out in the Christian community in Christ and through Christ. This week we talk about ministry, or as its translated in other editions, service.

We begin with something like an opening argument, based on the disciples’ argument over who among them was the greatest: “All this can occur in the most polite or even pious environment. But the important thing is that a Christian community should know that somewhere in it there will certainly be ‘a reasoning among them, which of them should be the greatest.’ It is the struggle of the natural man for self-justification. He finds it only in comparing himself with others, in condemning and judging others. Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together.” (91)

This whole chapter brings us back to one of the central and foundational points of the whole book, first put forth in chapter 1, namely, that for a Christian community to thrive, it must be in Christ and through Christ. How we view and treat our brothers and sisters in the community

always comes back to seeing them through the lens of having been saved by Christ's death and resurrection, and God's grace.

- Have you ever experienced or seen power struggles within a congregation? Or maybe your family?

Bonhoeffer then lays out a variety of ministries, or ways, in which the Christian community maintains an in-and-through-Christ foundation. First, "The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue."

"Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words... Thus it must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him. This prohibition does not include the personal word of advice and guidance: on this point we shall speak later. But to speak about a brother covertly is forbidden, even under the cloak of help and good will; for it is precisely in this guise that the spirit of hatred among brothers always creeps in when it is seeking to create mischief." (91-92)

"Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the beginning, each individual will make a matchless discovery. He will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, putting him in his particular place where he can gain ascendancy over him and thus doing violence to him as a person... God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction. God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made this person in His image. I can never know beforehand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation... But God creates every man in the likeness of His Son, the Crucified." (93)

- Have you ever been a part of a "parking lot conversation" about someone else from church? Even if nothing "bad" was said? How have churches you've belonged to handled "lots of people are saying" comments?
- How does this compare with "body of Christ" teaching (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12)?
- Do you have any stories to share about un-held tongues, and the damage they cause?
- How does this compare to "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all"?

This teaching isn't about false positivity or glibness; it's about community in Christ, how you see others, and treating them accordingly. Which leads to the next section, "The Ministry of Meekness: the path to how you treat others begins with how you handle yourself. This passage made me think of Romans 12:9-10: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor."

Bonhoeffer once again holds up the mutual forgiveness of sin as the hallmark of Christian community: "Only he who lives by the forgiveness of his sin in Jesus Christ will rightly think

little of himself. He will know that his own wisdom reached the end of its tether when Jesus forgave him...Because the Christian can no longer fancy that he is wise he will also have no high opinion of his own schemes and plans. He will know that it is good for his own will to be broken in the encounter with his neighbor. He will be ready to consider his neighbor's will more important and urgent than his own...The desire for one's own honor hinders faith. One who seeks his own honor is no longer seeking God and his neighbor." (95)

I agree with this quote. But I've also heard and experienced so many horror stories in congregations. There is the story of the split in my home congregation when someone resigned for private reasons and conjectures of mistreatment filled the vacuum. There is the story of the individual who had been coordinating a monthly meal at a homeless shelter who was told by two others that with so much on their plate they should just take some time off, since it was clear they weren't doing a very good job; the individual stopped volunteering for things. The story of one member turning to another, on opposite sides of a church conflict, and saying, "Why are you even here? No one thinks you belong here anyway." And so many more.

I'm trying to reconcile Bonhoeffer's teaching and these horror stories. How do you suffer injustice and hold your tongue without enabling bad behaviors? How do avoid a desire for honor while still holding others accountable for their actions? Is it still suffering for the sake of the gospel if you're faced with nothing more than meanness?

- Any thoughts on this?

Bonhoeffer continues: "One who lives by justification by grace is willing and ready to accept even insults and injuries without protest, taking them from God's punishing and gracious hand...The sin of resentment that flares up so quickly in the fellowship indicates again and again how much false desire for honor, how much unbelief, still smolders in the community.

"Finally, one extreme thing must be said. To forego self-conceit and to associate with the lowly means, in all soberness and without mincing the matter, to consider oneself the greatest of sinners...If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all. My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible...He who would serve his brother in the fellowship must sink all the way down to these depths of humility. How can I possibly serve another person in unfeigned humility if I seriously regard his sinfulness as worse than my own? Would I not be putting myself above him; could I have nay hope for him? Such service would be hypocritical." (96-97)

- Does this have any impact on the struggle to understand that I shared above?

The next three sections describe what makes the ministry of meekness possible. First, we have the ministry of listening. "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him...

“Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too.” (97)

- Do you have any stories of truly being listened to? Or not?

Next up is the ministry of helpfulness: “We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks, as the priest passed by the man who had fallen among thieves, perhaps – reading the Bible...But it is part of the discipline of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service and that we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God.” (99)

“Only where hands are not too good for deeds of love and mercy in everyday helpfulness can the mouth joyfully and convincingly proclaim the message of God’s love and mercy.” (100)

- Share some stories of “holy interruption” in your life.
- The third piece is the ministry of bearing, in the sense of “forbearing and sustaining.” “The Christian, however, must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure the brother. It is only when he is a burden that another person is really a brother and not merely an object to be manipulated. The burden of men was so heavy for God Himself that He had to endure the Cross. God verily bore the burden of men in the body of Jesus Christ. But He bore them as a mother carries her child, as a shepherd enfolds the lost lamb that has been found. God took men upon Himself and they weighted Him to the ground, but God remained with them and they with God. In bearing with men God maintained fellowship with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the Cross. And Christians must share in this law. They must suffer their brethren but, what is more important, now that the law of Christ has been fulfilled, they *can* bear with their brethren.” (100-101)
- What is the difference between “bearing” (in the sense of a shepherd or a mother) and simply “putting up with someone”/tolerating them?

This brings us back to the struggle of when to hold your tongue and when not to. The next section is on the ministry of proclamation. Bonhoeffer talks about when a Christian should speak God’s word of comfort or God’s word of admonition. I find that it’s easier to know when to speak a word of comfort, or to offer an act of comfort or encouragement (“share the gospel; use words if necessary”). But when do you speak a word of admonition, and when do you hold your tongue? Matthew 18 talks about speaking to a fellow member of the community openly when they have sinned against you. How does this all balance out?

It seems as though what Bonhoeffer is describing for the Christian community, in Christ and through Christ, is that you build up these three other ministries of listening, helpfulness, and bearing, so that it is within this overall context that you discern when to speak and when to hold

your tongue. There is also a sense of reciprocity one must embrace on faith: if you ministering to the others in your community, you must also trust that they will be ministering to you, as well. In this way everyone is fully cared for, and one need not worry as much about one's own honor.

“We are thinking of the unique situation in which one person bears witness in human words to another person, bespeaking the whole consolation of god, the admonition, the kindness, and the severity of God. The speaking of that Word is beset with infinite perils. If it is not accompanied by worthy listening, how can it really be the right word for the other person? If it is contradicted by one's own lack of active helpfulness, how can it be a convincing and sincere word? If it issues, not from a spirit of bearing and forbearing, but from impatience and the desire to force its acceptance, how can it be the liberating and healing word?” (103-104)

“The basis upon which Christians can speak to one another is that each knows the other as a sinner, who, with all his human dignity, is lonely and lost if he is not given help. This is not to make him contemptible nor to disparage him in any way. On the contrary, it is to accord him the one real dignity that man has, namely, that though he is a sinner, he can share in God's grace and glory and be God's child... We speak to one another on the basis of the help we both need.” (105-106)

I think that last line is key: “We speak to one another on the basis of the help we both need.”

- How do you know when to offer Christian consolation, and when to hold your tongue?
- What situations make you want to speak a word of encouragement?
- What situations make you want to speak a word of admonition?
- Have you ever been afraid of saying something to a brother or sister in Christ?

The last brief section is on the ministry of authority, which reminds us that all of this follows the lead of our Lord and Savior, the head of the body of Christ, Jesus: the one who washed his disciples' feet and commanded them to follow that example. Bonhoeffer warns against following charismatic leaders, saying that it's just a human desire for worldly power. “The Church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren.” (109)

- When we all get to gather again as a congregation, when the pandemic is over, which of these guidelines of Bonhoeffer's will be most useful as we rebuild our sense of community? Why?
- How can the Christian community keep justification by grace, the mercy of God, at the center of its life together?

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 final chapter is “Confession and Communion.” Stay tuned for a link to next week's Zoom session. Peace be with you!