

6. The Communion of Saints and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life Together

This chapter is a commentary on paragraphs from Chapter One of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* published by Harper and Row in 1954. In this chapter Bonhoeffer deals with two overarching themes: (1) that Christian community is a real not an ideal community, and (2) that this community is based on the reality of Spirit love rather than the reality of psychic love. In my chapter on Spirit Love (Chapter 5), I examine Bonhoeffer's paragraphs on this second theme. I will now be focusing on the first of these themes: that Christian community is a real, not an ideal community.

The Communion of Saints was the title of Bonhoeffer's first book, his doctoral dissertation. In his more popular book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer returns to his interest in Christian community. The phrase "communion of saints" does not appear in *Life Together*, but the phrase has become, for me, code words for the depth quality of Christian community. By "saints" I do not imply moral excellence. Saints are those in whom "sacred reality" or "Awe" is manifesting. Saints have not accomplished some sort of righteousness, they have simply allowed their true nature to flower. And the seed, the growth, and the flowering of our true nature are all provided by the Awesome, by the God we have discussed in previous chapters. The communion of saints is about the sort of community that saints have with one another. In the following paragraphs Bonhoeffer describes what such community is like.

I will begin on page 26, with the first paragraph of the section entitled "Not an Ideal but a Divine Reality."

Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves.

Bonhoeffer begins by describing something quite familiar to most of us. The specific Christian communities we have joined, or perhaps organized, do not correspond with our wish dreams – with our very definite ideas about what a Christian community should be. Bonhoeffer says that communities based on someone's ideals are unstable and vulnerable to breaking down. Furthermore, the true God, the Awesome Reality who calls us to membership in that realistic community of Awed humanity, shatters our dreams, our very definite ideas about Christian community. This shattering Bonhoeffer calls "God's grace." Such shattering is necessary for us to be led to genuine Christian fellowship. What sort of ideals or wish dreams does Bonhoeffer have in mind? Surely he would include both conservative and liberal ideals, both status quo nostalgia and our more progressive dreams as well. Mostly, I believe he has in mind our wish to avoid the raw truth that human beings are, in general, slow and disappointing in their openness to accessing their Spirit nature. Humanity, even the humanity being drawn toward genuine Christian fellowship, is characterized by sin, estrangement, delusion, bondage, malice, and deep skepticism about God's love for us. Affirming our need to face up to such reality, Bonhoeffer claims that it is a blessing for us to be disillusioned with the others in our groups, "with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves."

By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions but the God of truth. Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both. A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse. Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

Bonhoeffer is committed to realism, to the God of truth, to REALITY in capital letters. He is not a relativist who thinks that every view of Christian community is as good as the next one. Rather, he is insisting that God, the Final REALITY, will show us what Christian community is, and we need to be prepared to give up our inherited views and our privately derived alternative notions of what Christian community should be. Bonhoeffer singles out rapturous moments and lofty moods. If we go to Christian community for a bit of rapturous experience or some lofty moments to carry us through the week, we are way off the mark. These temporary emotional highs are not Spirit, not Awe, not the essence of any valid religious practice, Christian or otherwise. A real community of valid Christian practice will have "unhappy and ugly aspects." What might Bonhoeffer have in mind here? Here are some possibilities: people raising silly questions; saying silly things; having arguments about beliefs, about morality, about money, about new people in the fellowship, about race, about homosexuality, about sex, about politics, about the mission of the group. And we should add: having various persistent personality quirks, irrational restimulations, hostilities to one another, obsessions, addictions, gross violations of respect for others or for basic moral guidelines. All these and more will be present in any group of real people. If we cannot bear such things, if we insist on sweeping them under some rug of unconsciousness, if we want to walk out on any group that does not conform to all our preferences, then there is no hope of realizing a genuine Christian community. If we hold on to our dreams of an ideal community, we become the destroyer of genuine community no matter how "honest and earnest and sacrificial" we may be.

God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.

We often use the word "visionary" in a positive sense – a sense quite different from the way Bonhoeffer is using this word. It remains true that people need vision, that vision and vision creation is an important part of realistic living. Bonhoeffer adds the word "dreaming" to the word "visionary." By "visionary dreaming" he means an "ideal" to be imposed upon reality, rather than a realistic projection of possible positive outcomes.

When Bonhoeffer says that God hates visionary dreaming, he is not talking about a big person in the sky having a temper tantrum. Bonhoeffer simply knows from experience that the God who is REALITY opposes unrealism. Bonhoeffer also knows from experience that the dreamer, who through his or her dreaming rejects REALITY, becomes proud and pretentious.

This sort of dreamer demands that his or her dreams be realized by God as well as by others and himself. Bonhoeffer is clearly implying that genuine Christian community works the other way around. We begin with the requirements of the God of REALITY rather than fighting REALITY with our visions of how we would like things to be. Bonhoeffer spells out the consequences of such visionary dreaming. We become accusers of others, accusers of God, and finally despairing accusers of ourselves.

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. We thank God for giving us brethren who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and His promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what He does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: brothers, who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of His grace? Is the divine gift of Christian fellowship anything less than this, any day, even the most difficult and distressing day? Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship.

The rich humanity of this paragraph can be obscured by misunderstanding what Bonhoeffer means by “sin” and “forgiveness.” Also, “God,” “Jesus Christ,” and “the Word of Christ,” need some decoding – that is, some grounding in our own experience. And what is sin? Sin manifests in behaviors, but its essence is estrangement from REALITY, from God, from the Awesome. Sin is the opposite of trust, love, and freedom. Sin is suspicion, malice, and bondage. These states of being may lead to immorality, but sin is not immorality. Sin is not our behavior alone; it is a state that conditions our entire living. Sin is a tragic condition which all of us tend to find disgusting, frightening, or at least unseemly.

Yet, Bonhoeffer says that the revelation of a Christian brother’s or sister’s sin, rather than being a reason to complain or bolt the community, is an occasion for giving thanks. Thanks for what? It is thanks for the forgiveness of this companion and the forgiveness of ourselves. It is thanks for the reminder that moving forward in the fresh air of God’s forgiveness is the starting point, the continuing point, and the end point of Christian fellowship. We are not saints because we have achieved righteousness. We are saints because we are welcomed home to REALITY and have accepted the welcome. This living in the welcome of REALITY is the communion that characterizes true Christian fellowship. This is what it means to hear the Word of Christ, or as Bonhoeffer puts it “to stand under the Word of Christ.” This Word is above all else the Message that REALITY is welcoming to the prodigal human who has been away in a far country of estranged living.

And what does Bonhoeffer mean when he says that “God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ”? For Bonhoeffer, and all the theologians we are considering in this book, God is an Actor in human affairs. God is the final REALITY that impinges upon us in everything that happens. In the general sense, everything that happens is God’s action. But Bonhoeffer also uses “God’s action” to mean those special actions that reveal to us what is taking place in all actions. Jesus Christ points to such a special action. The Jesus Christ action in human history grasps us, transforms us, and thereby allows us to see what is going on in all actions. Specifically, the Jesus Christ action is a revelation of God’s forgiveness. Through Jesus’ life and death and his embodiment in the living body of the Christian community

called “resurrection,” a seemingly preposterous truth is communicated to us: that God loves us. The one and only thing that makes us part of the body of Christ is our acceptance of forgiveness for ourselves and for all human beings, even though most of those human beings do not accept that forgiveness or know that there is any need for it or have faith that such forgiveness even exists. For forgiveness does not mean that REALITY is less severe in the results it provides to our maladapted behaviors. Yet, it is also true that REALITY stands ready to welcome us home to realistic living with no penalty to be paid. This is the core of the Christian breakthrough and the foundation for Christian community. Christian talk about this has been confusing to many, mostly because we confuse mythic talk with literal fact. For example, perhaps we can feel the mythic logic that Christians came up with when they claimed that there was no penalty for our sin because that penalty had already been paid by Jesus. It seemed to them that the penalty REALITY permitted us humans to inflict on this fully realistic person, Jesus, had been received as payment for what we owe for all our horrific violations of realism. However we talk about it, to know that this forgiveness is true is to be “in Jesus Christ.” And to be “in Jesus Christ” means to participate in his trust, his love, his freedom – in other words, in his saintliness. We are the communion of saints because we share in this God-given righteousness. The forgiven ones know with certainty that they have a fresh start, a start that begins now, to live their real lives without any need for a defense of past performance.

This is why Bonhoeffer can say that God has in Jesus Christ laid the foundation for Christian community. This is what true Christian fellowship is composed of: sinners who have accepted forgiveness. The sainthood of this fellowship is the essential life of being human that remains when our real life and our real estrangements from our real life are acknowledged and when we have chosen to live from the foundation of being welcomed home to Reality rather than fighting Reality. And one of the ways we are tempted to fight Reality is wishing for a better group of “Christians.” Bonhoeffer chastises us for overlooking the truly great gift of having anyone at all who will hang in there with us through thick and thin and believe with us that our sins are forgiven.

In the Christian community thankfulness is just what it is anywhere else in the Christian life. Only he who gives thanks for little things receives the big things. We prevent God from giving us the great spiritual gifts He has in store for us, because we do not give thanks for the daily gifts. We think we dare not be satisfied with the small measure of spiritual knowledge, experience, and love that has been given to us, and that we must constantly be looking forward eagerly for the highest good. Then we deplore the fact that we lack the deep certainty, the strong faith, and the rich experience that God has given to others, and we consider this lament to be pious. We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts. How can God entrust great things to one who will not thankfully receive from Him the little things? 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.

This paragraph begins to release its full power when we reflect seriously upon those real religious communities to which we have belonged or to which we now belong. It might enrich our grasp of the power of what Bonhoeffer is saying if we would enumerate from our own experience illustrations of each of the following: no great experience, no discoverable riches, much weakness, small faith, and difficulty. Can we recall times when we have felt that our Christian group was paltry and petty and so far from what we expected? And here is the clincher, have we considered these laments to be pious? Do we realize that our complaints are hindering God from letting our fellowship grow? And if we are not grateful for these small gifts that we do have, are we clear that we cannot be entrusted with greater gifts?

Bonhoeffer does not deny that there are great gifts available to us and to our whole group. But they are gifts of God, not achievements by us humans. Our complaining to one another and pressuring one another stands in the way of our receiving these gifts. We simply need to turn loose of our ideals and controlling minds and let our true nature be given to us, and be given to us at the pace and in the surprising manner that it will be given. One of the reasons that we cannot force Spirit growth is that we have no idea where Spirit growth is going to go. Since it is our very being that is going to grow, we have never been there before. We have no way of anticipating it nor controlling this journey. God is the guide. We simply follow. And we follow courageously because we trust God. And we trust God because the journey home to Reality and the welcome home in Reality have proved fulfilling in the past. Indeed, perhaps we can recall that we got started on this journey because the action of God in Jesus Christ beckoned us to begin, and we began.

I will conclude my quotations from this section of the Bonhoeffer chapter with the paragraph that is second from the end of this section.

Christian community is like the Christian's sanctification. It is a gift of God which we cannot claim. Only God knows the real state of our fellowship, of our sanctification. What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as the Christian should not be constantly feeling his spiritual pulse, so, too, the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be constantly taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.

This paragraph colorfully underlines Bonhoeffer's emphasis on Christian community as God's gift. Bonhoeffer pokes fun at our inclination to bustle around each week taking the temperature of our group. Only God knows the temperature anyhow. And by "God knows" Bonhoeffer means that we do not know. God is the Mystery we confront. "God knows" is a metaphor for our trust in that Mystery. We are not talking about a big mind in the sky who thinks about things too grand for us. Such talk is metaphor, story, religious poetry. The ancients uses such language easily to talk about their life experiences. It is we who have literalized it. Both the ancients and Bonhoeffer are pointing to our experience that we become more and more our true selves – our trust, our love, our freedom – at a rate and in a manner that we cannot fathom. But we can trust that it will "please" this Mystery to increase and grow our Christian fellowship, our communion of saints, in the manner and at the speed that is appropriate.

So let us give thanks and simply be ready to give thanks again for what is coming next.