

Sermon Series: Life Together – Community
Psalm 133 and Ephesians 2:11-22

by David Hockett
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Just this past Monday, we observed the 73rd anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a young, brilliant scholar and pastor. He was a leader in the Confessing Church in Germany that spoke out against fascism and Hitler and warned the German people against their complicity with the Nazis. He was eventually imprisoned where he continued writing focusing on the nature of the Church and the call to discipleship which he believed entailed unwavering obedience to the way of Christ and his cross. Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Gestapo on April 9, 1945 at the age of 39 and is considered, not only a martyr, but one of the most significant theologians and church leaders of the 20th century.

Over the next five Sundays we'll be reflecting on the chapters of his little book, *Life Together*. Written in 1938, while living in community with the faculty and students of the seminary where he taught, *Life Together*, along with Bonhoeffer's other best-known work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, is the summary of his fundamental message around what it means to live with and in Christ. In five brief chapters Bonhoeffer describes the challenge and the joy of living together in Christ focusing on themes like community, worship, prayer, everyday work, and Christian service. *Life Together* describes what it means to be a Christian – living life together under the Word. There are a few copies of the book available in the church office or you can order it online if you'd like to read along with us. It's a wonderfully challenging exploration of the Christian life.

So, in her 2015 lecture in London, Dr. Lacey Warner notes that in "...1745 the Methodist Conference under John Wesley's leadership decided to experiment with preaching wherever opportunities arose...without forming societies (small groups), or regardless of the presence of societies (small groups), the purpose of which was to nurture those who responded to their preaching.¹ In other words, prior to this Wesley had only agreed to preach in places where there were active small group gatherings of Methodists or where they could form new small group gatherings.

The results of the experiment were unequivocal. Christian formation provided by the Methodist small groups, the societies, allowed a significant number of those who were moved by the revival's preaching to be nurtured and maintained in the faith.² When these groups were not accessible, those moved by the preaching were often lost. The experiment ceased in 1748, and the Conference turned its focus back to the formation of societies or small groups.³ My point is

¹ Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 54-55.

² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 115.

³ Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 165.

not really a history lesson on the development of the early Methodist movement, but rather, that the Christian faith is meant to be lived in community. Those who hear the gospel and respond are to come alongside other disciples who then live life together. God doesn't save isolated individuals. Rather, God in Christ is about the formation of a new family, a community, a new society that will live under the lordship of Christ. "Me and Jesus" has it all wrong. Yes, Jesus loves you uniquely for who you are and who he's called you to be, *and*, when you begin a relationship with him he brings all his friends to the party. There is no salvation outside of community. The Christian journey is not a silo experience. As Bonhoeffer asserts, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ....Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years,...we belong to one another through and in Jesus Christ."⁴ God is saving us together. We are not alone. What is more, we don't get to choose who comes with us. We don't define this community. We don't set the rules for who is in and who is out. Paul was very aware of our tendency to divide ourselves into groups, and pick sides, to erect walls and draw lines, to include and exclude deciding who's in and who's out. And Paul makes the bold claim that Jesus has broken down any and all walls, has overcome them once and for all, and has proclaimed peace to those who were already near to God, *and* peace to those who were far away. There are no walls in the Kingdom of God, only community and fellowship in Christ because in him our peace has come. In his body, we are one. This thing we call Church is Christ's body. He is the head. We are members together, inseparably linked with and in relationship with one another. So, if we are in Christ, then we are a part of the community that bears his name. As Paul points out, claiming to be in Christ while removing ourselves from the Christian community is like the eye saying to the hand I don't need you. (1 Corinthians 12:21) No, we do need one another. Like the cinder that quickly grows cold if removed from the fire, we need one another. "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable strength and joy."⁵

And this is good news. On Thursday evening Kim and I attended a banquet at the App Wesley Foundation. We heard from several students about what the Wesley Foundation has meant to them and their life of discipleship. Rev. Brad Farrington, the director at App Wesley, talked about their ministry with students, both the fruitfulness of their ministry and the challenges they are facing. He spoke about the mental health crisis facing many college and university campuses and how App Wesley seeks to be a place of healing where students who may feel isolated and alone can find a sense of belonging and the strength and joy that come when we live life together in Christ. Like many Christian communities App Wesley members share prayer concerns and pray regularly with each other and Brad recently received a simple yet profound request for life together. "Talk with me." Let me know that I'm not invisible, that I matter. In a world that seeks to divide, and separate, and isolate, where so much emphasis is placed on the individual, that

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. p. 21.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, p. 19.

Jesus invites us to share life together, wants us to have companions for the journey, gives us brothers and sisters not by biology but by baptism, this is abundantly good news. In a world where authentic community and connection seem more and more to be absent this is good news that in Christ there is a place where all are welcome. This is news that heals and saves. God does not want you to be alone. In fact, God wants to drag you kicking and screaming right into the middle of a messy, complicated, imperfect, beautiful community where you will be challenged to love others, even people you don't like, *and* where you will be blessed by the gift of others who love you even when you are at your weary worst. The psalmist speaks for us...

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore. – Psalm 133

How good and pleasant it is when we share life together. Now notice, it doesn't say how easy, or how problem and conflict free it is when we share life together. We all know better than that. Life together can be wonderfully beautiful and painfully hard. We sometimes do and say things that cause real harm, even in the body of Christ. And over the next few weeks Bonhoeffer will help us think through the disciplines and practices that are required to sustain our life together in Christ and to heal the divisions when they occur. But the bottom line is, to a world desperate for someone to speak to them, to know their name, to care enough to listen to their story, and then to be willing to walk alongside, the bottom line is that the Church of Jesus Christ has the very best word for that world, "You belong here." Not because of what you've done, who you are, or who you know, but simply because God loves you, and Christ has invited you.

This thing we call Church, this community, this life together which we all share is not our possession or creation, it is a gift. It is a gift from the One who created us out of the dust and said, "It is not good that they are alone. I will make them companions and friends." As Paul reminds us, "...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone...in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." You Church, in and through Christ, are a dwelling place for God.

We are meant for life together - to laugh and celebrate together, and to weep and mourn together, to worship and serve alongside each other, to be in community, in communion with God and one another through Christ. And so, there is a place for you here, a seat at the family table because Christ offers the invitation. The closer we draw to him, the closer he brings us to one another, until all are one in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.