

Vestry Sunday 2024

When I decided to leave the teaching profession and enter holy orders, the first person I told of my decision (after my parents of course) was my priest in Montreal. He replied, telling me how pleased he was for me and for the Church and enclosed a small book for me to read. He said that this would probably never appear on the curriculum at Trinity but had had a profound affect on my friend and after reading it, I fully understood that often, the best things DO come in small packages.

In 1945, a young German Lutheran pastor was hanged at Flossenberg concentration camp for offering moral and spiritual support to army officers who had attempted to assassinate Hitler in 1944. Thus came to an ignoble end the life and witness of a true martyr of the Twentieth Century – his name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. When Hitler ascended to power, one of the first things he did was to meet with both the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches leadership and hammer out an agreement. Simply put, the churches would not interfere with the activities of the Nazi party and in return, the Nazis would not interfere with the governance of the religious life of the nation. Knowing that this would be the Big Lie, a group of Lutheran pastors broke with their national church and created what became known as The Confessing Church. They set up an illegal seminary at Finkenwalde where they created what they saw as the ideal model of true Christian living. As the community formed and matured, they relied on a small book which Bonhoeffer had written a few years before which he called Life Together. It was to be the blueprint for life as Christian community, and I believe should be on every seminarian's "must-read" list because it speaks so profoundly and deeply about not only the "how" of Christian fellowship but the "why" as well.

This morning, I would like as a pre-Vestry reflection, to share with you some of the intro to this remarkable book as I truly believe that, in Bonhoeffer's words and thoughts lies the future not only of the Church Universal but of us here at Holy Trinity as a small ray of light in the Christian universe. I realize that I will be leaving you for about two months but would like to return to Bonhoeffer's vision for us upon my return. If anyone is interested, Life Together is available in Kobo form and on Amazon and Chapters as well.

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity"...thus does Dietrich begin.

He gives no flowery intro but immediately centres on the core of the issue.

He writes, “ The Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. In the end, his disciples abandoned him. On the cross, he was all alone, surrounded by criminals and the jeering mob. He had come for the express purpose of bringing peace to the enemies of God. So, Christians too belong not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the midst of enemies. There, they find their mission, their work... It is by God’s grace that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly around God’s word and sacrament in this world... The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.. and the believer needs not feel any sense of shame when yearning for the physical presence of other Christians, as if one is still living too much in the flesh. A human being is created as a body and therefore the believer praises The Creator, The Reconciler and The Redeemer, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of other Christians. The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian living in the diaspora, recognizes in the nearness of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. In their loneliness, both the visitor and the one visited recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body. They receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility and joy. They receive each other’s blessings as the blessing of the Lord Jesus himself.

Let’s pause here for a moment and think about what Bonhoeffer says: first, that our weekly gathering as a community is a grace moment, a gift from God which should never be taken lightly. When the earliest faith communities began their life together, it was under the most dangerous of conditions – the State and the Temple sought them out and wanted only the destruction of the communities because they both violated and called out church and state for the ways in which they expressed and lived their vision of power and authority. Second, these communities met where they could, when they could – in secret places and gathered under the knowledge that some who gathered with them one week could be in prison or dead the next time they met. So, they came together in joy and celebration because they believed that the physical presence of others was the will and gift of God. They also saw that the gathering was precious because of the fragile nature of the membership, an idea which was beautifully summarized by the author Chiam Potok in his book, I Am Asher Lev when he wrote, “Life is precious, for that which we have forever can never be precious.” Would that we might gather like that, YES? Third, Bonhoeffer speaks of Jesus living in the midst of his enemies and for me that means that we cannot hide behind our piety or our prayerbooks but must be

witnesses to what we know through how we live and what we do both for one another and for those who are either hostile or indifferent to what and who we represent, the fellowship called by and “foundationed” under Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer goes on, “Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this and none that is less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or in the daily community of many years, Christian community is solely this: we belong to one another only and through Jesus Christ. What does this mean?: it means first, that a Christian needs others for the sake of Jesus Christ. Second, it means that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time and united for eternity...Christians need other Christians who speak God’s word to them...and the goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God allows Christians to come together and grants them community... The measure which God gives the gift of visible community is varied. Christians who live dispersed from one another are comforted by a brief visit from another Christian, a brief prayer together and another Christian’s blessing. ...Others are given the gift on Sundays of the community of the worship service. Still others have the privilege of living a Christian life in the community of their families... God put the Word into the mouths of human beings so that it may be passed on to others. When people are deeply affected by the Word they tell it to others. God wills that we should seek and find God’s living Word in the testimony of other Christians...they need others as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation. ..God allows Christians to come together and grants them community and their life together is based only on Jesus Christ ...I have community with others and will continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede and the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is alive between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we really do HAVE one another...It is essential for Christian community that two things become clear right from the beginning: first, Christian community is not an ideal but a divine reality; second, Christian community is a spiritual reality.”

For me, what Dietrich describes is so beautifully simple: that our sense of community and fellowship begins when we recognize the Christ in one another; when he affirm that we are broken persons but people capable of redemption and forgiveness; that as a community we NEED one another to complete the whole; and that it is community which strengthens, nurtures and celebrates our uniqueness as beloved children of God – a community which reflects and lives out what Tertullian said long ago, ‘See how these Christians love one another.’

I want to leave this reflection at this moment. From this point on in the section on life with others, Bonhoeffer enters into reflections on the obstacles to community. This is far from the ideal most authors about community create and promote, because Dietrich does not gloss over how hard it can be sometimes to both nurture and be “one in the Spirit and one in the Lord”. Rather, he faces the divisions and difficulties that exist in living among others with honesty and frankness. There is no point in talking about what it means to be a fellowship, a faith family, if we do not confront those obstacles and divisions which are on the edges and sometimes in the heart of our life together. I would like to pick up when I return from where I leave it today when I return. We need to confront the issues with honesty and with a spirit of love and reconciliation; we need to hear one another with the heart of Christ; we need to decide whether the life we envision as Christian community here is worth the “blood, sweat and tears” required to banish the darkness and let the light shine.

I am convinced that we can and will recreate ourselves more and more in the image and mission of Jesus here and I believe, I know that the precious community we currently have will grow from strength to strength, if and when we commit ourselves to the journey.