

Life Together

Romans 13:8-14

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 18:15-20

Sep. 7, 2014 Pentecost13A

The title of my sermon today, *Life Together*, comes from a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and scholar who came to the United States to lecture after Adolf Hitler had risen to power in Nazi Germany. When he could have stayed in a safe haven, he felt called to return to Germany to aid the underground Lutheran church movement called the Confessing church. Where the established state Lutheran church couldn't make waves, couldn't speak out against the evils of his day, the confessing church remained faithful its witness. Bonhoeffer led an underground seminary to train ministers who wouldn't be under the thumb of the Nazi regime. This was illegal in itself and could have led to quick arrest. His book, *Life Together*, grew out his experience at the seminary. It's a classic of Christian literature on what it means to be Christian in a world of violence and prejudice. It speaks of the centrality of Christ in the church, the church as divine reality, and the church as the community of love. Those may not sound like earthshaking truths until you consider that they were truths that Bonhoeffer and his students knew were worth dying for. The title seems to capture the spirit of both of our scriptures for today. What happened to Dietrich Bonhoeffer? After being arrested for taking part in an underground effort to assassinate Hitler, he was imprisoned and finally hanged in a German prison shortly before the Allies could come to the rescue. He died a Christian martyr.

It was a matter of life and death to try to live as true Christians in a time like that. It's easier to be in Christian community today, but it is still a challenge in many ways. We do face challenges of polarized ideologies, of competition for our time and energy, and mixed signals from the world

around us. The church doesn't have the presence in the community it had when most of us were younger. We try to be God's people, we try to live a way of life that Jesus taught us, by word and by action, but it's not easy. It is easy to think of the church as another club of like-minded people, a voluntary organization like others in town. In some ways that's true, because like the Red Cross or other organizations, we do great good in the community and in the world. Churches send mission trips to places of need at home and abroad. Churches are hosts to refugees and sponsor food banks and clothing banks to feed and clothe the homeless and hungry. But the church is more than a humanitarian agency, because the reason it reaches out to help is rooted in the Gospel of Christ. As Bonhoeffer said in *Life Together*, "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."ⁱ

St. Paul, in several of his letters, said that the church is Christ's body on earth. We're so used to hearing that, that we don't even realize what an astounding thing it is. Jesus Christ came to be the Savior of the world. Jesus Christ came to set people free from sin. Jesus Christ came to heal people physically and spiritually. Jesus Christ came to reconcile the world to God, and to unite a divided world. And that's just what our calling is if we are to be Christ's body on earth. We are responsible to carry out just that mission in the world today. Like I said, that's astounding, and a downright scary.

One of my mentors in ministry is Dr. David Beebe. He told me the story of how he had agreed to become interim pastor at a church. During the negotiations he noticed one man who didn't seem very pleased—maybe downright hostile is a better word. David went over to him and introduced

himself and to ask what was bothering him. “Just because you’re the interim pastor, don’t think that you can run this church,” the man almost shouted. David paused, and then said, “You’re right. I’m not sent here to run this church. But neither are you. It’s Jesus Christ who is supposed to run this church, and neither one of us should get in his way.” If we’re the body of Christ, Christ needs to be our head. In the Christian Church, we are proud of congregational autonomy—we get to make our own decisions, own our own property, and choose our ministers. But we also need to remember that this isn’t your church, but it’s Christ’s church. Autonomy doesn’t mean that we get to do our own thing. It means that we are responsible to follow Christ authentically and faithfully in this particular setting.

In the lesson from Romans that you heard earlier, Paul picked up on that most powerful of Christ’s teachings, the Great Commandment. Christ himself had used words from the Old Testament to summarize all the laws and teachings. Love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. Paul called it the Love Commandment. To love God and to love one another is to fulfill the law. If you love God, you won’t worship idols. If you love your neighbors, you won’t cheat, steal from, lie against them, or kill them. Love is active, positive, transforming. And love is what we do if we are to be Christ’s body in this world. To be Christ’s body means that we put aside that which is divisive, that which is selfish, that which is destructive, and get on with the business of loving God and neighbor.

So the church isn’t like a human club or organization, because it’s a divine institution. It’s Christ’s body on earth. But it is at the same time a very human institution, because of one very obvious reality. It’s made up of people, and people act like—well, people. Our insecurities, our suspicions, our selfish needs, our dislikes, our fears, our narrow vision all

make us end up making decisions and performing actions that aren't very Christlike.

Jesus knew from life together with his own disciples that there would be bad moments, times of misunderstanding, times of conflict, times of human egos bumping up against one another. So in our Gospel reading, we heard Jesus giving advice for the church. This is a bit amazing, since the church wasn't established yet, but Jesus knew that the time would come. If a fellow believer sins against you, hurts you, go one-on-one to resolve it. Let the other person know, quietly and in private, a chance to understand your side of things, so he or she can apologize, and set things right. If the other person refuses, though, and doesn't budge, take two or three mutual brothers or sisters in Christ to be witnesses, to help both of you work it through. When—and only when—that doesn't work, do you bring it before the church. Then, if the one who is causing the hurt still doesn't repent, treat them like a sinner or tax collector. Now that sounds harsh. You've heard about the Amish practice of shunning, where someone who was on the outs with the church would be ignored, as if they weren't even there, until that person either left the fellowship or repented. But does that sound like Jesus? "Treat the other person like sinners or tax-collectors?" How did Jesus treat sinners and tax collectors? He befriended them. He accepted them as God's children. Matthew, who wrote this Gospel, had been a sinner and tax collector. In our movie today, Jesus said "treat him like a tax collector," and then tackled Matthew, the tax collector turned disciple. Eugene Peterson, in the Message, puts the advice this way: "If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love." Now that sounds more like Jesus. What started out sounding like a way of resolving disputes becomes an opportunity for reconciliation. In other words, act like Jesus—do the loving thing, even if it means

loving enough to confront, that ultimately will bring people back together again. Didn't an Illinois lawyer, Abe Lincoln, say that the best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend?

What Jesus went on to say about binding and loosing may sound a little odd to modern ears. But he's reminding us to take seriously how important it is to stay in Christian community. If you reject someone, hurt someone's feelings so that they leave a particular church, it's a big deal. Or if you choose to leave a church or become inactive because someone has done that to you, that's a big deal, too. Why? Because it hurts your—and their—relationship with God. Christ doesn't want us to hold grudges, because that destroys community. If we hold onto a memory of being hurt in the past, and not let it go, it wears upon us, and keeps us alienated from Christian fellowship, and weighs us down like carrying a load of rocks on our back. But when we let go, when we reconcile, when we forgive, then God dumps that burden from our backs and we can go on with the business of being brothers and sisters in Christ.

The last part of Jesus' words in this passage go like this in the Message: "When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer on it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there." Those words come alive to us at communion time, as we gather around the Table of the Lord. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, put it this way. "The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship. As the members of the congregation are united in body and blood at the table of the Lord so will they be together in eternity. Here the community has reached its goal. Here joy in Christ and his community is complete. The life of Christians together under the Word has reached its perfection in the sacrament".ⁱⁱ

As we try to live in Christian community, as we try to live out the Love Commandment, as we try to reconcile ourselves with others, and as we try to learn to forgive and accept forgiveness, we're not alone. Christ is there in our midst, giving us the love, the forbearance, the grace that we need. The Lord's Table is our reminder of that presence. All we have to do is to remember who we are and whose we are. We are Christ's body on earth, God's people. Amen.

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper, 1954, p. 28.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 122.