



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Life Together
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. . . . Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding (Romans 14:7-19).

In the 1930s, when the Nazis were holding rallies to unite the German people around slogans like “*Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer*”—one people, one nation, one leader—Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a young German pastor trying to teach seminarians what it means to belong to the body of Christ. The Nazis appealed to fear and resentment, finding scapegoats for their problems and lifting up grandiose visions of national glory. Bonhoeffer appealed to the Word of God, to the love that casts out fear, and the freedom that comes from confessing our own faults, and the joy of caring for one another as Christ cares for us.

The Nazis shut down Bonhoeffer’s seminary, but he collected his thoughts and published them in 1939, as Hitler was about to launch World War II. Bonhoeffer was killed by the Nazis just before the war ended, but his little book was translated into English a few years later under the title *Life Together*, and it’s become a modern Christian classic. I read it again last week, and this morning as we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s Supper I’d like to share a few of Bonhoeffer’s insights on what it means to belong to the body of Christ.

First, to be part of this body means we are not alone. For all the talk of “rugged individualism” in American culture, the fact is that we, like everyone else, crave some sort of community. The signs are everywhere, from the explosion of social media to the omnipresent sports teams that keep kids

and parents constantly on the run. All those Facebook friends and frenetic activities reflect how much we want to belong somewhere, to feel that we are not alone in this world, that our lives have some kind of meaning through all of these connections.

Many people seem content just to have their circle of friends and keep constantly busy, but some of us long for something more. We want to know whether there's anyone out there who really understands us, who knows our faults as well as our strengths and loves us anyway, but also has the power to make us better than we are. We want a community of people who care about things that matter and bring out the best in us, helping us to become bigger souls than we could ever be just through our everyday work and play.

The apostle Paul reminds us that we do not in fact live to ourselves: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." That's not some sort of hypothetical speculation; it's a simple truth for Christian people. Bonhoeffer says, "Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."

We belong to one another because Christ has called us together, to be part of his body here on earth. That means we're accountable to God in Christ, and we're also accountable to one another, because what any one of us does or fails to do has an impact directly or indirectly on everyone else. Just as the health of any organ in the body affects the whole body, so the spiritual health of any individual Christian affects the entire body of Christ.

That may not be self-evident, but it's true. We depend on one another in this Christian community. We pray for each other, for example, and God has given us the great privilege of bearing one another's burdens, so that our prayers really do make a difference. If we don't pray for one another, then, we let each other down. If our souls don't grow in their capacity to care for one another, then the body of Christ is weaker than it ought to be. What each of us does or fails to do has an impact on everybody else.

We're accountable to one another in Christian community, but we don't judge each other, in the sense of condemning people for their faults. Bonhoeffer says, "We are gentle and we are firm with one another, for we know both God's kindness and God's firmness." We confess our sins every Sunday, and as Bonhoeffer goes on to say, "If my sin appears to me to be in any way smaller or less reprehensible in comparison with the sins of others, then I am not yet recognizing my sin at all." We tend to grade on a curve, and we tell ourselves that although we're not perfect, at least we're not as bad as *that* person. But Bonhoeffer reminds us that if we're not appalled at our own sin that sends Christ to die on a cross for us, then we haven't really acknowledged our sinfulness before God.

So we don't condemn or judge one another, but neither do we look the other way when we see a fellow believer doing something that's harmful to himself or others. People who have lived with addictions of any kind—whether to alcohol or drugs or food or pornography or unhealthy relationships or anything else—know that it doesn't help to enable anyone's addictions by excusing them. "Nothing can be more cruel," Bonhoeffer says, "than that leniency which abandons others to their sin."

Our life together helps us to see our own faults clearly, so that we can confess them and give them over to the grace of God, and that in turn gives us the humility and sincerity to respond gently but firmly when we see the effects of our fellow Christians' sins. The point is that we never put a stumbling block in the way of another person, either by what we do or by what we fail to do, because everything that happens in the Christian community is meant to build one another up and strengthen the body of Christ.

Bonhoeffer says that every day brings a new test of the Christian community. We can tell something about the vitality of our life together by asking, in his words, "Has the community served to make individuals free, strong, and mature, or has it made them insecure and dependent?" He asks about the impact of our worship on the people who gather here: "Has it transported them for a few short moments into a spiritual ecstasy that vanishes when everyday life returns, or has it planted the Word of God so soberly and so deeply in their heart that it holds and strengthens them all day long, leading them to active love, to obedience, to good works?"

In our life together we literally embody the presence of Christ to one another. We serve each other by listening and caring, and in that way God does his own work through us. God gives us not only God's word but also God's ear. As Bonhoeffer says again, "We should listen with the ears of God so that we can speak the Word of God."

"In our attitude toward other Christians we simply see reflected our own relationship to God." The way we relate to others is a fairly reliable indicator of the way we relate to God. The more our lives reflect the grace of God, the more gracious we will be with one another; and conversely, when

we are not gracious with others, that may mean we are not as close to the Spirit of God as we imagine.

But when we grow deeper in our relationship with God, then as Jesus prays, “the world will know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” And that, of course, is why Christ has called us together: to reflect the love of God in the way we live, with one another and in witness to the world around us.



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