

Pentecost IX
Romans 1:1-17 and Excerpt from *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
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Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, growing up in a suburb of Berlin. One of seven children, he described as close knit and happy.¹ As a teenager, Bonhoeffer knew he wanted to study theology. During seminary, he distinguished himself as a piercing, creative student, who presented a doctoral thesis at age 21. Bonhoeffer was a pastor and teacher, teaching in Germany as well as the United States. In 1933, he left Germany for London as the Nazi government increased its power, but he returned to shortly thereafter to lead an underground seminary, whose purpose was to train young pastors speaking truth against Hitler. Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* is the product of his years living amongst these ministers-in-training. And here he reflects on the power of being formed into a Christian community and the way such formation offers the grace to keep living even in unimaginable circumstances.

His sentence – “We should not take for granted the privilege of moving amongst other Christians” -was written amid a time and place where that privilege was threatened. It's also poignant to be read today, amongst the realization of how much we took for granted the privilege of gathering together physically. His assertion – “We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ” - is a bold statement, reminding readers weary of war and us, carrying our own particular weariness, that life is held together not by our own power but by the untiring efforts of God.

I've been thinking lately about the forceful nature of the pandemic, wondering about its ability to splinter our sense of togetherness. Bonhoeffer's writings came as a tonic to my weariness, just as his life is a testament to resisting those forces that attempt to defy God. Social distancing, and its accompanying practices, decrease the virus's spread and are absolutely exactly what we are to do right now. The practices also are the opposite of our instinctive pull toward one another. We want to hug, shake hands, or pull a chair closer to better hear our neighbor. I notice the push toward physical closeness and the pull against it for safe practices most often when I'm running. I began my route, making sure I have a face mask. I start out, pounding down the sidewalk hyperconscious of those ahead or behind me. Whenever there is someone moving toward me from the opposite direction, one of us will cross to the other side. If that isn't possible, then one will step onto the road or into the grass, finding a way to keep a wide distance from the other. Block after block, I keep scanning for potential encounters. And my brain almost feels as if it is being re-conditioned. It is a small analogy, I know, but I find myself grieving the distance and wondering how long we will live amid this crisis.

What Bonhoeffer teaches us is that the Christian community is, by God's grace, designed to withstand crisis. It is built upon a cross, after all, a cross that leads to a tomb beside which others weep. And then the tomb cry opens up to Resurrection. **You** are teaching me how to remain connected amid the crisis, via Facebook comments, emojis, socially distant walks and Zoom chat rooms. Distant, yes, but not disconnected; still linked by the instinct to live life together.

¹ The details are taken from the Introduction to *Life Together* by John W. Doberstein. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: Harper One, 1954).

For his participation in the resistance to Nazi rule, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually executed. One biographer, in summoning up Bonhoeffer's impact on the Christian church, used the ancient words of Tertullian to characterize his life. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." It is a stark phrase, but one no less true in its starkness. The willingness to sacrifice, risk, relinquish whatever is not of God and accept the consequences of such acts does, in fact, create a birthplace for God's new life. It is in our ability to face the suffering that we are empowered to enter into that death-into-life movement of God.

This morning we will think about Christian community through Paul's writing in Romans, the first seventeen verses of the first chapter. We'll be exploring the book of Romans throughout the month of August. I invite you to take the time during the week to read through these chapters. Romans is considered Paul's masterpiece; a mix of steady, foundational theology, soaring rhetoric, and the acute insights of a seasoned, beloved pastor. Even if you don't think you are familiar with Romans, you probably are. It is in Romans that Paul writes about the good he wishes he did and the sin he can't help himself from doing. It is in Romans that we find the assurance to hope for what we cannot see and the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Romans was central to the theology of Martin Luther and his writings about justification by faith become the basis of the Reformation. And it was while hearing Luther's writings on Romans that John Wesley, Methodism's father in faith, found his heart strangely warmed. Christian theology is indelibly marked by Paul's wrestling with the work God accomplished through Christ in Romans.

Now the church in Rome was a tiny church. In a city of about one million people, the Christian community is considered to be somewhere between two dozen and two hundred. And yet the faith of this community, Paul claims, is known throughout the world. Paul asserts their faith has a global impact having never visited the church! Rather, he is longing to meet them, to worship with them and hopes to get there soon. In fact, Paul will die in Rome. Here is the power of Christ moving to create a community despite distance. Here is a community formed, through pen, paper, couriers, and prayer, all instruments by which God's love remakes lives.

Today's text has three short lessons. First, what we gain in Christian community is mutual encouragement and mutual encouragement should not be underestimated. The word mutual is critical here. Paul begins saying I want to see you because I want to share a spiritual gift with you. In other words, I want to visit you because I have something unique I must impart to you. But quickly he corrects himself, writing I long to see you so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Now he is being honest; it is not just that you need to see me. I need to see you. The Christian faith is not a solo endeavor; it exists in and for community. In community we bear each other's burdens, offer a word of wisdom, wipe each other's tears, and know the power of someone else's prayers. In this painful time when how we interact has been so radically altered, Christ's spirit moves, even in our distance, to make us into something new.

The second lesson comes through Paul's bold assertion: I am not ashamed of the gospel. How do we understand Paul's use of the phrase 'I am not ashamed?' Is he thinking about the shame of the cross, the scandal of a crucified Lord? Is he thinking about the social status of Christians, for many communities drew from the undignified, uneducated, or scorned? Fleming Rhtledge

offers a different idea. She suggests Paul is saying: I am not ashamed of my need for God. To be open to God's power, she writes, we have to admit that we need it.² And, for many of us, educated, comfortably clothed and fed, it is difficult to admit just how much we need God's grace. It might be acceptable to say we need a little help or a slight touch-up. But Paul admits, I am in dire need of God and I am not ashamed to confess it.

It is alarming to witness the life and death stakes of this present time, to see the desperate need in the world for the righting of wrongs, the controlling of a virus, an open path toward dignified life for those once scorned. And yet, here the Christian community can admit these truths with courage. We are not ashamed of our dependence upon God's direction, nor will we hide that we owe our lives to God's grace.

Admitting our need of God and one another unleashes God's power. This is the point toward which Paul drives, which he calls the righteousness of God, given to us through faith, for faith. The whole of Romans is a teaching about how to understand and recognize the righteousness of God.

The term righteousness often conjures up images of overly pious people, maybe holy hermits, or those who meticulously count the markers of faith. But the righteousness of God is Paul's term for God's never-ending, always-active promise to us for life. It is a combination of God's ability to fulfill promises and to restore relationships. It is a verb more than a noun. It is God's endless activity to bring healing, mercy, nourishment, justice, and love to every one of us. And it is the endpoint to which our community travels.

I've always marveled at the courage of Bonhoeffer, who had the option in 1939 to stay in the safety of the United States and wait out World War II. Bonhoeffer traveled on one of the last ships to return to Germany before the outbreak of war. I suspect it was the courage of someone who knew what his life was to stand for and who loved his particular community of Christians. What power. It is the same power that was in John Lewis. I'm also struck by what Bonhoeffer, living in an underground seminary, names as resources to access that courageous power. He cites the nearly ordinary actions of Christians: prayer, mutual encouragement, service, confession of our radical need of God. What power can we access together? And what is calling out to us, to be reborn?

² Rutledge, Fleming, "Not Ashamed of the Gospel" in *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007) 15-23.

