

Life Together?

Acts 2:42-47

Fourth Sunday of Easter/ 5th May 2020

Years ago, I received a call at the church from someone who wanted to speak to me. He wasn't a member of the church. I didn't know him. I'm not sure why he phoned Catonsville Presbyterian. He had a question: "Do you have to go to church to be a Christian?" Before I could answer, he said that he could live out his faith by himself, that he didn't have to be part of a church. He could watch a worship service on television from the comfort of his home. I sensed that he wanted me to agree with him, give him permission to stay home. Was he struggling with guilt or self-doubt? I don't know. His question came to mind this week while I was reflecting on this text. And his question takes on a new relevance as many Christians these days are not going—should not be going—to church, but are worshipping in the comfort of their homes on Sunday mornings, watching services on their televisions or computers in their pajamas, sipping Mimosas, and pastors are preaching to empty sanctuaries or from makeshift pulpits in their living rooms.

Do you have to go church to be a Christian? I said to him then and still believe now that you can't be a Christian by yourself. He didn't like my answer. You can individually subscribe to beliefs about Christ and try to live out a Christian ethic on your own. That's possible, I guess, people do that all the time. But the first Christians would find this very odd and strange because as we see throughout the New Testament, especially here in Acts, a follower of Christ is always part of a community. When people heard the good news of God's love in Christ, the Holy Spirit moved over them and through them and called them out from the crowd into a church, an *ekklesia*, meaning a people "called out." The Holy Spirit placed them in a new community, a new fellowship or *koinonia*, where the Christian life was a shared experience. That's because the Christian life is formed in us in and through the *koinonia*. We need community. When we share our lives in *koinonia*, participate in the body of Christ, we help each other become better followers of Christ. We have a better chance of being faithful when we're together.

We're given a window here into what it was like when followers gathered together. They didn't *go* to church in some other building or location, they *were* church, in their homes, where they lived. When they gathered they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (learning, exploring the faith, preaching), to fellowship (meaning *koinonia*), to the breaking of bread (sharing a meal and sharing in the presence of the Risen Christ whenever they broke bread) with glad and generous heart, and prayers (Acts 2:42). Teaching, sharing, eating, praying and praising God. "All who believed were together," Luke tells us, "and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). A life together.

This image of the church is today put in sharp relief as we figure out how to be church while physically apart from one another. We're together apart. And while this is difficult, remarkably, our compassionate distancing is showing us what we're missing: our life together, the fellowship or *koinonia* of the church, as well as life together with family and friends. At least there's a connection within the church via the internet. Zoom calls, although at times exhausting

and frustrating, especially when the internet is slow, are still allowing for *koinonia*. Thank God for Zoom. Thank God for the internet. But our virtual world is no substitute for the real, for life embodied, present, together, in the same room, a real room not a virtual room, a room with walls and windows, living together in the same space, a common space—sharing a common life. Our virtual world is making us hungry for the real. This entire experience is helping us see so much that we have taken for granted, such as the church itself—not the building (even if you miss being in the sanctuary), not the institution, the committees and boards—I’m talking about what happens when God’s people gather together, the *koinonia*, the sharing in the life of God’s people, which can happen even on Zoom or when we’re unable to physically get to worship on Sundays. Maybe we’re discovering that the church, even with its messiness and pettiness and dysfunction at times, is a remarkable gift and joy. We really need communal life.

Still community is not a new law. It’s not a rule that you have to be part of a community. Instead, community is the fruit of overflowing love between people formed by and alive in the Holy Spirit. It’s about *desire*. We find that we *want* to be with God’s people. A people formed in love and now free to share lives with one another, share resources, possessions and property and capital, including emotional capital, sharing with those in need (Acts 2:45). The Holy Spirit moves in us and forms a common space that allows us to live in a new way, in a new social reality.

Contemporary theologian Willie James Jennings reminds us that when the Spirit moves us this way, “A new kind of giving is exposed at this moment, one that binds bodies together...where the followers give themselves to one another. [Giving] possessions will follow.” And we don’t hear, “You shall give....” Giving is not a law. Instead, you may give freely in love for Christ because you *want* to. “Thus anything,” Jennings says, “they had that might be used to bring people into sight and sound of the incarnate life, anything they had that might be used to draw people to life together and life itself and away from death and end the reign of poverty, hunger, and despair—such things were subject to being given up to God.”¹ And what’s described here is not an ideal that we might aspire toward one day. It’s something real. Possible.

Eberhard Arnold (1883-1935) was a German pastor-theologian who founded a religious community called the Bruderhof, in 1920, where people came to live together intentionally, to share the Christian life on a daily basis. There are [Bruderhof](#) communities all around the world today, including in the United States. In 1929, Arnold was invited to give a series of [lectures](#) at the Tolstoy Club in Vienna. Germany and Austria were still reeling from losing the First World War, society was torn apart by conflicts between rich and poor, and deep polarization between the left and right. He was asked to talk about community and what the gospel says in the face of the pressing social and religious crisis of their time. He warned that isolating individualism is a kind of poison. It’s a curse because people are no longer connected to one another. “They no longer live with each other and for each other,” he said, “but only next to each other.”² When we fail to live with and for each other, we lose our connection with God, he said. Nevertheless, the Spirit desires to hold us together. The Spirit works to join us together.

And we want to get back together, we really do. But, I wonder, do we really want to go back to the way things were? Sure, we need some semblance of normalcy and structure in our

lives. But in many respects, if we're honest, there's much about our former lives that will not be the same and we need to grieve this. Still there's much in our former lives and in society that needed changing. And we're seeing this with greater clarity.

I've been thinking that we are really living in an *apocalyptic* time. The word *apocalypse* has come to mean a cataclysm of destruction or the end of the world, but what it literally means in Greek is "uncovering" or "unveiling," which is how it's used in the New Testament. The pandemic is apocalyptic in that it's uncovering and revealing, opening up and disclosing much that we haven't known before or were reluctant to acknowledge about ourselves, our neighbors, our communities, our healthcare system, racial and social inequities, government incompetence. We are discovering what we value, what really matters in our lives (like good leadership) and what we should no longer value, what no longer matters. This is a learning moment for us, a time of clarity.

The work of Rebecca Solnit is helpful here. She's written extensively about what we discover in times of disaster, how people, for example, in San Francisco responded to the earthquake in 1906 or in 1917, when an ammunition explosion and fire devastated Halifax, Nova Scotia. "Disasters," she writes, "provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what manifests there matters elsewhere, in ordinary time and in other extraordinary times." In *Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, she notes: "It's tempting to ask why if you fed your neighbors during the time of the earthquake and fire, you didn't do so before or after."³

This is an apocalyptic time and it's an apocalyptic time for the church. Conscious of how important community is for us, hungry for connection, of being together, I'm curious to see: How will all of this inform the nature of the church—this community in particular—when we are back together? What is most essential in our life together and what isn't? What is the church really for? What will we take up and what will we set aside? How will our worship life deepen, our shared life become richer and more profound? In love, will we share our resources and our gifts with "glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46) and provide for the neediest among us? What is the Spirit trying to form in us, through us, for us, and with us for the "goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:47)? Time will tell.



"Last Supper" by Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev (c.1360s-c.1430)

¹Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 39-40.

²Eberhard Arnold, "From Property to Community," *The Plough*, May 19, 2016, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/church-community/from-property-to-community>.

³Rebecca Solnit, *Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (Penguin, 2010), 6, 28.