

Life Together Teaching -by Ryan Thurman

Community Life is both a gift and a divine reality

- The visible, face-to-face living together of Christians is a privilege by the grace of God. The companionship of a fellow Christian is the physical sign of the gracious presence of Christ. This is a source of great thanksgiving and praise to God.
- Christians need one another. We seek and find God's living Word only in the witness of another. The goal of all Christian community is this: To meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation
- In Christ, Christians belong to one another. This is a divine reality and not dependent upon experience. We are bound to one another because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, not because of shared interests or like-mindedness or common experiences.
- Christian community is not some extraordinary social experience, some ideal religious fellowship. It is a divine reality.
- Our periodic disillusionment with the Christian fellowship is actually an important crisis. It is a beginning point for the fellowship to become what it is by God's gift and promise.
- Christian community is not an ideal which we must work to realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. It is a spiritual reality (created by the Holy Spirit) not a psychic [human] reality (coming from our own natural urges, powers, and capacities).
- Relationships within the Christian community involve setting the other free from my control, free to be what they are in Christ. Not the image I would desire for them but the true image they bear as Christ's own.
- It is not the experience of Christian community that is primary, but solid and certain faith in the God who calls Christian community into existence for God's purposes. The Christian community is bound together by faith, not by experience.

The Day with Others

- The case for morning devotions lies in this assertion: The first thought and the first word of the day belong to God. It is at dawn when Christ rose in victory. Thus, the morning belongs to the church, the Christian family, and its rightful language is that of praise and adoration of the Triune God.

—Morning does not belong to the individual, it belongs to the Church of the Triune God, to the Christian family... Through history the church has been called to common praise of God in the early morning. Before the pressures of the day,... —the first thought and the first word belong to him to whom our whole life belongs (p.42-43).

- The Psalter has a unique place in the devotional life of the church. The secret to the —difficult| texts in Psalms is to understand that even if a verse or psalm is not one's own prayer, it is nevertheless the prayer of another member of the fellowship in another time and place. Thus it is Jesus praying through the mouth and experience of his Body on earth, the church.
- Holy Scripture is more than a watchword, more than —light for today|; it is God's word for all people for all times. What is missing in the church is an understanding of the whole of Scripture. Sound bites and the

reading of isolated texts are not enough. Instead, the practice of —consecutive reading‡ allows the listening community to discover the whole story and to enter into it as its own.

- Only in Holy Scripture do we learn to understand reality correctly. For example, our life, our troubles, and guilt are only ever a part – not the whole – of reality. In the Scriptures we see the full reality, for there is our life, our troubles and guilt, and our salvation.
- Song – praise, thanksgiving, and prayer – is the voice of the church. Song has had this role through all ages and circumstances. In practice, it is a unique voice in that it joins individual voices together to speak and pray the same Word at the same time.
- Common prayer involves praying as a fellowship and in our own words. It is important for common prayer to reflect the real cares, needs, joys, thanksgivings, petitions, and hopes of the community. It is equally important for the community to support the praying brother or sister by making the prayer its own. The poorest mumbling utterance may be more faithful and edifying than the best- formulated prayer.
- Jesus keeps three kinds of table fellowship with us: daily fellowship at meals, table fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, and the final table fellowship in the Kingdom of God. Every one of these meals fills Christians with gratitude for the living and present Lord. It is never —my daily bread, it is always —our daily bread. Thus, it is not our prerogative to keep either our bread or our table for ourselves only. When Jesus joins those who eat together in his name, there are ethical implications.
- The entire day belongs to God. Within it there is a time for prayer and a time for work. —Work, which takes up the bulk of the day, is given a sense of meaning and unity when it is done —in the name of the Lord Jesus.
- The end of the day lends itself to prayer of intercession. Now we lay down the work of our hands and commit ourselves and one another into the hands of God with prayers for blessing, peace, and preservation. Evening prayer includes the petition of forgiveness for wrongs done, for readiness to forgive, and provides an occasion for reconciliation.

A Healthy Shared life in community requires a life alone with God

Blessed is he who is alone in the strength of the fellowship and blessed is he who keeps the fellowship in the strength of aloneness. (p. 89)

Two qualities are distinctive in his understanding of the Christian’s —day alone. First, what would seem at first glance as the —privatel‡ practice of devotion really is not. It is understood and practiced rightly only within the context of a relationship to the Christian community. Second, it is related in practice and substance to the Scriptures. To miss the importance and centrality of these two relationships is to misunderstand the distinctive nature of the Christian devotional life. The theological and practical guidance provided in this chapter has to do with the discipline of time apart – away from the rush of activities, relationships, noises and duties of daily life. It involves a defined time to let the *Word of God dwell in us, to hold before God our own life in all of its particularity, and to intercede for those whom God has called us to care and pray for.*

- Living in community with others and being alone are parts of a whole cloth. —Only as we are within the fellowship can we be alone, and only he that is alone can live in the fellowship. (p.77). There are practical pitfalls to wanting fellowship without the capacity for being alone, and in thinking that solitude can be fruitful without participating in the fellowship.

- The practice of silence is a —silence under the Word and silence that comes out of the Word. Holding one’s tongue, ceasing conversation, and simple stillness under the Word of God are what Bonhoeffer has in mind.
 - The Christian needs a fixed time when he or she can be alone during the day for Scripture meditation, prayer, and intercession.
 - The purpose of meditation is to expose ourselves to the specific text —until it addresses us personally. (p.82). The goal is not to receive new ideas, but instead for the Word to penetrate and dwell —within us. The Word is the active player in the Word/person encounter, not me. It seeks to —stir us, to work and operate in us . . . it will do its work in us (pp.83-84) – even when we don’t feel or experience it.
 - Christian prayer is response to God’s Word and promise. It is not prayer in general. It is the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, to accept it in personal situations, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations.
 - Intercession is a matter of holding before God definite persons, definite difficulties, and therefore definite petitions. It is not general and vague. It is time-consuming. A congregation lives by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses.
 - The real test of the integrity of our personal devotion is if it makes any difference in daily life – if it is so unrelated to the real workaday world, or if it leads to a real contact with God from which one emerges strengthened and purified. The test is in the day.
 - The fellowship is —sundered and besmirched or —strengthened and hallowed by what one offers up in one’s solitude on its behalf. We are members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence.
 - There is a close, reciprocal relationship between the Christian’s time alone and in community. Neither exists with any integrity without the other.
- 1) Solitude and Silence – There is a great need for solitude and silence in our life. The discipline of time apart away from the rush of activities, relationships, noises and duties of daily life
 - They offer me entry into the healing silences of God. Solitude and silence position me to hear my Father say to me, “I love you.” Hearing this from him is foundational to my inner healing. My compulsivities are energized by a search to meet my deep need to be loved. Other people, in the end, are unable to meet this need—it is too great. But God can, and will! *For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.*—Psalm 62:1
 - They are the answer to loneliness. Some fear solitude and silence will increase feelings of loneliness. In reality, it is in solitude that I discover the profound reality that I am never alone.
 - 2) Scripture Meditation—to allow the Word of God to work in us
 - 3) Prayer—is the response to God’s initiating action of His Word, it is our readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, to accept in our personal ‘real’ situations of life...tasks, decision, sins, temptations
 - 4) Intercession—is a matter of holding before God specific persons and their struggles in specific petitions. It is time consuming... “*A fellowship lives by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses.*”

How we interact with others in community

Christians learn what it means to be the body of Christ in the world as they minister to and with one another. Ministry is envisioned as redemptive relationships in community. God's Word – the good news of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new creation in Jesus Christ – does not spring naturally from the human heart or intellect. It can only be communicated through the witness in word and deed of faithful believers listening attentively to one another, actively helping one another, and bearing one another. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, through such practical yet essential ministry, Christians are able to become proclaimers of God's Word for and to one another. ... *We become bringers of the message of salvation to one another*

- Service should govern the Christian community. Each person's role and identity in the group ultimately serves the same overall goal: service.
 - The discipline of the tongue – not saying all that occurs to you – is an essential ministry that members of the body must learn to offer each other.
 - The differences that exist among people within the Christian community are not incentives for talking, judging, and condemning others, but rather causes for rejoicing in and serving one another.
 - In Christian community, every individual is an indispensable link in a chain. As such, each has a task to do and all depend upon the ministry of others.
 - The first service that one owes to others in the community of faith consists in patient, attentive listening to the other. This is the beginning of love in the community.
 - The second service that each is to perform for the other in Christian community is that of active helpfulness – even in the simplest and smallest ways.
 - The third service consists of bearing others – not sidestepping the —burden that others may impose upon us in the community of faith. It is in such bearing that the Christian community shares in the fellowship of Christ's cross.
 - These ministries are reciprocal. We are strengthened in offering ministry to others in the knowledge that it is being offered to us as well.
 - The ministry of proclaiming is contingent on the others – listening, helping, and bearing. It involves the communication of the Word of God to and with each other. Sharing the Word with another person is more difficult than preaching from the pulpit.
 - Authority in the Christian community is dependent upon humble service and is found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out. No other qualities are necessarily helpful. *Authority lies in the exercise of ministry, not in personal attributes.*
- 1) Listening—attentive listening to others is the beginning of love in the community
 - It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear.
 - 2) Serving—active helpfulness—even in the simplest and smallest ways
 - We must allow ourselves to be ready to be interrupted by God
 - 3) Bearing with one another—not avoiding the burdens of others but entering in and helping carry them.
 - These ministries are reciprocal

- To be engaged in ministry is the work of the entire body of believers

4) Speaking the Word of God to one another

- God's Word—***the good news of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new creation in Jesus Christ***—It can only be communicated through the witness in word and deed of faithful believers listening attentively to one another, actively helping one another, and bearing one another. Without listening, how can it really be the right word for the other person? If it is contradicted by one's own lack of active helpfulness, how can it be a convincing and sincere word? If it issues, not from a spirit of bearing, but from impatience and the desire to force acceptance, how can it be the liberating and healing word?

5) Loving mutual submission

- In Christian community, every individual is an indispensable link in a chain. As such, each has a task to do and all depend upon the ministry of others. We are inter-dependent and must learn to protect and honor one another and learn to receive from those who are seen as *weak*

In Christ we are invited – even more, we are summoned and authorized – to move beyond the boundaries of our individual lives into the shared reality of Christian community. The community of faith to which the New Testament bears witness is characterized by the practice of a radical togetherness. This is seen most clearly in the New Testament in the frequent use of the reciprocal pronoun, —one another (*allelon*). The list included here, far from exhaustive, offers a vision for the life of the community of faith. It is a community of persons who –

- live in harmony with one another (Rom.12:16)
- welcome one another (Rom. 15:7)
- are servants of one another (Gal.5:13)
- comfort one another (I Thess. 5:11)
- bear with one another lovingly (I Thess.5:11)
- do good to one another (I Thess. 5:15)
- are subject to one another (Eph.5:21)
- confess our sins to one another (James 5:16)
- forgive one another (Cor.2:13)
- love one another from the heart (I Pet.1:22)
- meet one another with humility (I Pet.5:5)
- pray for one another (James 5:16)
- have fellowship with one another (I John 1:7)

- Faithful community is lacking when congregations have fellowship as —devout people but not as the —the undevout, as sinners. Only when we are sinners can we be changed by the forgiveness that God offers in Jesus Christ.

- Jesus' commission to offer forgiveness of sins is given to the whole congregation. When an individual exercises it, it is exercised on behalf of the whole.

- Where confession and forgiveness take place there is a breakthrough from isolation to community.

- Confession of sin challenges all self-justification, and is therefore a dying with Christ on the cross. This humiliation and death is the path of breakthrough to new life.

- We have certainty of our sins being forgiven when God's word of forgiveness is heard on the lips of a fellow Christian in response to my confession. No kind of self-talk can compare to the real human words of forgiveness that come from another person's lips.

- Anyone who knows her/himself to be a sinner and in need of God's grace, and practices confession, can hear the confession of another in the congregation. It is not a good thing for one person in the congregation to be the confessor for all the others.
- Confession should not be a pious, routine activity, but one through which a Christian seeks only God's promise of forgiveness and life.
- To go to the Lord's Supper rightly prepared is first to go settle our wrongs committed against one another.
- The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the unmatched fulfillment of Christian community. Here the community has reached its goal – joyfully united in body and blood at the table of the Lord now and for all eternity.

When God was merciful, when He revealed Jesus Christ to us as our Brother, when He won our hearts by His love, this was the beginning of our instruction in divine love. When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren. What God did to us, we then owed to others. (pg. 24-25)