



Finding Our Way Together

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It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Rereading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* in the midst of a global pandemic shed a brand-new light on familiar words.¹ My personal copy of this classic work is heavily marked and highlighted, but upon this most recent read, I could not help but notice how certain phrases had taken on new meaning, while others, previously unmarked, now spoke volumes. At points, it was almost as though I had never read it before.

To be sure, the occasion for the writing of *Life Together* had nothing to do with a pandemic. When the German Christians endorsed the Nazis in 1933, a small group of church leaders formed a resistance movement and called it the Confessing Church. It was not long before the church founded five seminaries, including the underground seminary at Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer was named its first director. It was his desire that the seminary there function not only as a place for theological education but also as a place where all residents devoted themselves to living as disciples of Christ just as Jesus instructed in the Sermon on the Mount.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954).

In time of stress and strain, fear takes over and dominates our lives, pushing us away from those others we need. The fabric of communal life is frayed by our enforced apartness. God gives us the gift of community to recover and to be the kind of connected people we were created to be.

Hence, the study of Scripture, confession, prayer, and singing, along with daily work and respect for one another, uniquely characterized the common life shared by Bonhoeffer, the faculty, and the candidates for ministry. The very foundation of the seminary was Christian community.

While it is true that most of the students at Finkenwalde never made it to parish ministry—the seminary was shut down by the Gestapo just two years after its opening, and twenty-seven of its students were arrested and imprisoned—that is not to say that what happened there was unsuccessful. Quite the opposite.

In the pages of *Life Together* we have some of the most simple, complicated, eloquent, and practical words on the nature of Christian community ever written. And to think that Bonhoeffer was initially reluctant to write about the lessons learned at Finkenwalde. It was only after the seminary was shut down in 1937 that he “saw the need to record for posterity not only the daily regimen and its rationale, but also to voice his conviction that *the church needs to promote a sense of community like this if it is to have new life breathed into it*” (emphasis added)²

Indeed. Bonhoeffer’s words are so very important for a time such as this—that is, a time when faith leaders are looking to the future and actively working toward reimagining and living into a new normal in a post-pandemic church. The insights of *Life Together* are as relevant today as ever before. In fact, they read almost as marching orders for finding our way in 2022.

I.

Prior to March 2020, never did I imagine a suspension of gathering together with others (and the impact it would have on all our relationships) that would last for weeks, then months, then one year, and then yet another. At first, the thinking was that things would return to normal in a very short time, for sure by Easter Sunday. But as the pandemic progressed and soared out of control, what seemed initially to be an interruption turned into a major disruption of so many things, including, most particularly, social interaction. Coffee with a friend, lunch with coworkers, and celebrations with family came to a sudden and screeching halt as a result of stay-at-home orders.

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² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: Harper, 1995), 322.

The simple pleasures of stopping to chat with a neighbor at the grocery store, catching up with a colleague while walking down the hall, or visiting an elderly parent were prohibited. And the daily ministry tasks of visiting the sick in the hospital; performing weddings, funerals, baptisms, and confirmations; and presiding over worship were all shut down or limited to small numbers. Restrictions governed everything from visitations to funeral luncheons to fellowship after worship to wedding receptions.

The first of several “Covid weddings” I presided over was in June 2020. It was attended by the bride, the groom, their parents, four siblings, the organist, and me. The bride wore her beautiful dress as she processed down the long aisle, meeting her groom dressed in his new suit, and together they made their vows. Then I pronounced them husband and wife, and eight people clapped as the organist played the recessional and they walked back up the aisle together. Most of their guests viewed a livestream from home, though a few, in a display of deep love and support, showed up in the church parking lot and watched the ceremony on their cell phones.

So, when Bonhoeffer wrote, in the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Life Together*, “It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians,” in rereading those words I was struck by how remarkably pertinent and deeply resonant they were, even if written in an entirely different context.³

Bonhoeffer went on, “It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us.”⁴ Here, I could not help but feel a pang of disbelief that I had not even once anticipated such a thing in this life. Truth be told, so woven into my daily existence were the simple pleasures of social interaction that I barely gave them a second thought, rarely recognized them as gifts of grace, and furthermore—full disclosure—sometimes experienced them as interruptions, or even intrusions, on my own most precious time.

That is, until they were taken away. The fact that Christian community and relationships could suffer so was never on my radar. And yet, there we were: isolated at home, sanctuaries empty, human touch reduced from an embrace or a handshake to an air-hug.

Bonhoeffer continued, “Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”⁵ Being called to gratitude for one another and for the great grace of being gathered as one body has taken on an increased significance and importance. Having been separated for such a long time, giving thanks for community

³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 17.

⁴ Bonhoeffer, 20.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, 20.

now comes from a much deeper place. Thanksgiving is due to God for the blessed joy of togetherness, for the gift of gathering face-to-face, and for the grace of Christian community.

I cannot help but think about the apostle Paul and how he began so many of his letters in the New Testament. His heartfelt salutations nearly always included praise and thanksgiving for others. To the Corinthians he wrote, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:4); to the Colossians, “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Col 1:3); and to the Romans, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (Rom 1:8). Paul’s appreciation and love for his friends and his gratitude expressed to God are models for his readers as well as reminders to us to never take for granted the gift of Christian community.

Although the very first in-person worship services held after the shutdown were characterized by carefully calculated social distancing; limited numbers; and an absence of congregational singing, distribution of communion, passing of the offering plate, fellowship, and shaking of hands, nevertheless many people actually wept as they reentered their beloved church homes. Just to be back in a sacred place of comfort and belonging was powerful enough to draw tears of rejoicing from even the most stoic. I myself could barely utter the invocation in the presence of the believers! There were just thirty of us at that first in-person gathering—the sanctuary was stark and mostly empty—but my heart was so filled with awe at the wonder of simply being together, at the joy of being in the presence of others in the sanctuary, that my voice quivered as I began our service with words I have said hundreds, if not thousands, of times before: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” The communion. *The communion!* The words of the psalmist, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (Ps 133:1), never rang more true, and I could barely contain the depth of my emotion.

Bonhoeffer says that the gift of Christian community may any day be taken away from us. No longer are those words about another time and another place and some other people. They speak to our present reality, and it is good to be reminded that Christian community is both gift and grace.

II.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24–25

It is true that the church has experienced a steady decline in attendance for decades, and it is also true that the pandemic did the church no favors on this front. According to an article in *The Wall Street Journal*, “The number of churchgoers

has steadily dropped in the US over the past few decades. But Covid-19 and its lockdown restrictions accelerated that fall. In-person church attendance is roughly 30 percent to 50 percent lower than it was before the pandemic, estimates Barna Group, a research firm that studies faith in the US.”⁶

Technology became an early friend in the pandemic, and faith leaders were grateful for even the most unstable of networks. At least services could be offered and sermons delivered, if only from a living room or within the walls of an empty worship center aided by a smartphone perched precariously on a music stand. As pastors, we were surprised when former members who had moved away were “tuning in” and sharing in worship as well as in other online ministry offerings. And then we were delighted to discover people tuning in from all across the United States and even around the world; people who knew nothing of us or of our ministries were discovering churches far away from where they lived. Within the first weeks of the shutdown the church I serve recorded online viewership from all fifty states and eleven countries. One woman participated in a church support-group meeting for survivors of suicide, and this she did on her cell phone from a forest in Ecuador. We were both heartened and encouraged when, as many churches reported in the early months of the shutdown, there was a significant increase in attendance over the same period pre-Covid. Thank you, technology.

However, even as the reach of technology helped us meet a deep need, it has raised some serious questions about what it means to be a community of Christ. One parishioner said to me while expressing gratitude for our commitment to both digital and in-person worship, “I don’t know if we will ever be back. We like worshipping from our couch.” Others report loving the convenience of worshipping without the hassle of having to get everyone dressed and in the car and in to church on time. Others enjoy the leisure of worship without the struggle of wrangling squirmy children back into the pew; the children play on the family room floor while church is on TV.

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Others, having had their regular pattern of church attendance disrupted, have returned less engaged or, worse, have simply drifted away. Writing for

⁶ Janet Adamy, “Churches Changed During the Pandemic and Many Aren’t Going Back,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/church-pandemic-covid-online-11636728162>.

Ministry Architects, Rob Dyer, senior pastor at First United Presbyterian Church in Belleville, Illinois, noted, “While church leaders did the hard work of navigating health guidelines and exercising creative adjustments, many people got used to life with less church. Or, perhaps, even life without church.”⁷ To this point, in a bold statement of honesty, another parishioner said to me, “I don’t really miss church. Maybe I should.”

Emily Dickinson began her poem “My Sabbath” like this: “Some keep the Sabbath going to church, I keep it staying at Home.”⁸ Though published in 1864, her words sound as current as the morning news. For many, “doing church from home” became a staple of 2020 and 2021 and now, it seems, quite possibly beyond.

But, here again, the words of Bonhoeffer read as though they were written yesterday. “It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s word and sacrament.”⁹ Indeed, inasmuch as the church is the body of Christ, as Bonhoeffer stresses, our gathering as the body is essential to understanding who we are as children of God and how we live our lives in relationship to one another.

A study conducted in 2017 by the University College London found that “watching a live theater performance can literally synchronize your heartbeat with others in the audience, whether you know them or not.”¹⁰ Writing in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, researchers in Sweden showed that “choir singers not only harmonise their voices, they also synchronise their heartbeats.”¹¹ So also it must be for worshippers. Perhaps that is what Bonhoeffer was getting at when he wrote, “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”¹²

To be sure, as Bonhoeffer explained, the gift of community is bestowed in varied ways, and for that variety we must be grateful. He mentions specifically the sick, as well as those in prison or exile, and notes that even a brief visit by a friend or family member is beneficial. Today we might add the homebound and vulnerable who benefit from technology to attend worship, fellowship, even recovery programs. That said, the physical presence of other Christians is a source of both joy and strength, and we must be wary of neglecting to meet together.

⁷ Rob Dyer, “They’re Not Coming Back,” *Ministry Architects*, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://ministryarchitects.com/theyre-not-coming-back/>.

⁸ Emily Dickinson, “My Sabbath,” in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52138/some-keep-the-sabbath-going-to-church-236>.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 18.

¹⁰ “Audience Members’ Hearts Beat Together at the Theatre,” UCL Psychology and Language Sciences, November 17, 2017, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/pals/news/2017/nov/audience-members-hearts-beat-together-theatre>.

¹¹ Rebecca Morelle, “Choir Singers ‘Synchronise Their Heartbeats,’” *BBC World Service*, July 9, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-23230411>.

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 19.

III.

In the quiet moments as I removed the wine and the wafer from my communion kit and prepared to share the sacrament with a homebound member, she said softly and sadly, “I am afraid people have forgotten how to be kind.” The next day, another person, reflecting on the mood at the office where she works, theorized, “It seems like the pandemic has unleashed a lot of bad behavior in people.”

Their observations are not unfounded. An article in *Time* magazine dated October 15, 2021, reported, “September 2021 was a bad month for manners.”¹³ What followed was a list of aggressive, rude, violent, and angry incidents resulting in both injury and arrests. The author concluded, “Re-entry into polite society is proving to be a little bumpy.”

Bumpy indeed:

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) says there has been an unsettling increase in unruly behavior and violent incidents aboard commercial flights, a disturbing trend it described as being “off the charts.” In a typical year, the FAA logs 100 to 150 formal cases of bad passenger behavior. But since the start of this year the number of reported cases has jumped to 1,300. That’s a dramatic increase with something of an oxymoronic twist—incidents are way, way up but passenger levels are still way, way down because of the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁴

In November 2021, at the opening-night performance of *A Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, an audience member stood up and launched into a profane and racialized rant. Thirty minutes passed before she was escorted out and the show could begin.

This rise in bad behavior has pushed some businesses to take responsibility for teaching manners. At the Indiana University Health System, a welcome sign reads: “Please take responsibility for the energy you bring into this space . . . your behavior matters.” After an emergency meeting of the Rhode Island Hospitality Association, they put together a Please Be Kind toolkit for their members. This, in response to increasing incidents of angry, impatient, and demanding customers. One restaurant closed for a day to give its staff time to recover from the impoliteness of the guests.

As pandemic restrictions were lifting, it seemed reasonable to assume people would welcome the return of social interaction with glad handshakes, warm embraces, and lively fellowship. But, according to psychologists, “the long separation has made social interactions more fraught. The combination of a contagious, life-threatening disease and a series of unprecedented, life-altering changes in the rules of human engagement have left people anxious, confused and . . . resentful.”

¹³ Belinda Luscombe, “Why Everyone Is So Rude Right Now,” *Time*, October 15, 2021, <https://time.com/6099906/rude-customers-pandemic/>.

¹⁴ Rich Thomaselli, “FAA Says Naughty Passenger Behavior Is ‘Off the Charts,’” *Travel Pulse*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.travelpulse.com/news/airlines/faa-says-naughty-passenger-behavior-is-off-the-charts.html>.

“It’s displaced anger,” says Bernard Golden, psychologist and author of *Overcoming Destructive Anger*. “They’re angry about other things but they take it out in those encounters.”¹⁵

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On top of that, there are supply-chain issues, staff shortages, and longer wait times for everything from checking out at the grocery store to getting an appointment at the vet even for a desperately ill pet. People are frustrated and weary, and it is showing up in how we treat one another.

To this point, the chapter entitled “Ministry” in *Life Together* becomes instructive for all of us as we move through 2022. Given the degree of discourtesy experienced in our society right now, I marvel that this chapter begins with a section called “The Ministry of Holding One’s Tongue.” We would do well to be reminded, as Bonhoeffer writes:

Where this discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the beginning, each individual will make a matchless discovery. He will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, putting him in his particular place where he can gain ascendancy over him and thus doing violence to him as a person. Now he can allow the brother to exist as a completely free person, as God made him to be.¹⁶

In another section of the same chapter, “The Ministry of Listening,” Bonhoeffer writes, “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.”¹⁷

This chapter unfolds with subheadings for other ministries, including meekness, helpfulness, bearing with one another, proclaiming, and authority. It reminds me of a children’s book by Muuro Leaf titled *How to Behave and Why*. Both read like a grade school primer on good behavior and manners, except that Bonhoeffer’s answer to Muuro’s “why” is that all of our interactions with others are based upon our identity as redeemed people of God. When we look into the eyes of another, we see a brother or sister who is the image of God. That realization alone

¹⁵ Luscombe, “Why Everyone Is So Rude.”

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 92–93.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, 97.

should be enough to drive behavior toward compassion and kindness and away from intolerance and impatience.

IV.

I believe Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* speaks more poignantly than ever, providing a sense of direction for a newly imagined post-pandemic church whose very foundation is Christian community, and it does so in a way that can fill us with hope. Hard-earned lessons from the pandemic make his words come newly alive, reminding us of the blessed gift of relationship, the joy and strength we gain when we come face-to-face with one another, and the beauty, dignity, and worth inherent in each of us as beloved people of God. ☩

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