

***The Caring Community***  
***Acts 2:42-47***  
***May 30, 2021***

These words describing the first Christian community are truly revolutionary. Let's hear them again from the Message translation: **They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers...They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. (Acts 2:42ff)**

A few years ago we had a guest speaker at Erskine where I served as minister, Rodger Nishioka,. Roger was then a professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary and was well known for his work with young people. Roger told us back at the beginning of this new century that the number one reason why young adults are staying in the church after their first visit is the warmth of the welcome they receive. It wasn't the preaching, important as that might be; it wasn't the music, central as that is; it wasn't even whether it was formal or informal in structure. The reason these young adults decided to stay was that someone talked to them and welcomed them into the fellowship of the community. Most young adults simply walk past churches like ours, never imagining that we might have anything to say to them.

The reality out there in our society is that people are generally feeling alone. We have everything to keep us connected: cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, and so on. But, in spite of the plethora of communication devices, people are still feeling that they are somewhat isolated. What does the faith community have to say to them? What do we have to offer them that will help them to experience, not only human warmth and caring, but also the presence and power of God's love and forgiveness? Hopefully we can answer that question.

I personally have found the opposite to be true when I have visited certain churches on my holidays. I remember very well attending an Anglican church in our neighbourhood with Gail and experiencing

little or no warmth or welcome. We walked out of that church after the service and not one person welcomed us or said hello. Not one! We also attended a prominent Presbyterian Church in Hamilton where again, no one spoke to us or made any attempt to connect with us. Not one! How does one feel when this is the experience of church? And we were active Christians who attended because worship was important to us. What if we were a couple who were attending church for the first time?

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever felt alone and without purpose? When I arrived in Canada as a teenager, I didn't know too many people. I hadn't gone to school here, hadn't developed childhood friends, and hadn't established any social connections. Nor had ever been a church attender.

I remember buying my first car, a 1956 Ford which had those lovely flaps that covered the rear wheels. On weekends I used to aimlessly drive up and down the Lakeshore Road in West Toronto just for something to do. What I remember most about those times was the overpowering sense of being alone. I got to know a few people at work, but my most satisfying human connection came through the church that I quickly became part of. There I found people who genuinely cared about me and prayed for me. The caring faith community was such a blessing for me as a young man. It helped me find wholeness and human connection.

You can't help being impressed by this young church in Acts. They truly became a spiritual community. What defined them as church was not their institutional structure, nor their excessively monkish piety, but rather their genuine human warmth and joy. It was a warmth and joy that seems to have been the expression of a deep faith in Jesus and not simply a social bonding. These are people who have found their unity in Christ, not in any superficial sense of belonging, as to a club. In other words, the church in its original expression was united in their deep commitment to Jesus Christ and the way of the cross, and we should add, to outreach. They worshipped together; they ate together; they celebrated the sacraments together; they prayed together. This is a community born of the Spirit and one that cared deeply for each other.

Thinking on this theme I was drawn back to look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's little book **Life Together** written in 1938. From around 1932 Bonhoeffer was formulating his ideas on what a true Christian community ought to be. He saw the church as Christ existing as community which challenged believers to behave like Christ to one another. In the mid 30's he was able to put his thinking into practice by forming a community of young seminarians at Finkenwalde. It was a community committed to the Gospel, to peace, given to prayer, and dedicated to service to those in need. It was a community shaped by the Sermon on the Mount, by prayer, meditation, service to one another, confession and the sacraments. All of this in post 1935 Germany ran counter to the laws of the Nazi government and would by 1938 be closed. He was arrested in 1943 and hanged for involvement in the plot to kill Hitler on April 9, 1945.

Bonhoeffer says: ***Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this and none that is less than this...We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.***

While there is much humanitarian work being done by people with no connection to the faith, it is also true that there is a rich history of humanitarian work done by those in the church. It has always been the case that, as Bonhoeffer would say, it is the very nature of faith in Christ to be for others. The church, as, exists for the world, not for its own private piety. So it's an important reminder that Christians have always been on the front lines of humanitarian relief work long before the news crews arrive. It is faith communities like this one that send the resources and people to take their place in the battles against injustice, poverty, and disaster. They care because they belong to Jesus Christ who has called us into the world as his hands and feet. They care because God's love compels us to share good news and bring peace and hope where there is none. They care because as recipients of God's mercy and grace they feel compassion to the weak and needy.

Everywhere we turn in the New Testament we find letters encouraging individuals and communities of faith to bear one

another's burdens. We read in passages such as Hebrews 10 these words:

**Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:19ff)**

I know its sometimes hard for us to look at the church today as anything else but an institution. But obviously, from both the Acts passage describing the early community of faith and their disciplined spirituality, and the passage from Hebrews which highlights our origins as community in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, church is poorly thought of as an institution. Belonging to this much maligned church community is to belong to Christ by faith. We are those who have been called out of the world, made clean through Christ's life, death and resurrection. We have been commissioned to a life of discipleship, prayer and service. Entrance to this body, according to the Hebrews passage and numerous others in the New Testament, is through faith in Christ. We are the people who have been washed in the waters of baptism, cleansed, and reconciled to God.

As such we are a community that seeks to encourage and foster love and peace for all our brothers and sisters. My own brothers I loved. We come from a common set of parents; we grew up in the same home; we lived through the same set of troubles and circumstances. I will always think of them as family. But there is something different when it comes to my relationship with my brothers and sisters in the Lord. In a deeply personal and spiritual way I have so much more in common with my Christian brothers and sisters. My love for you is surely born at a much deeper level than that of my human family.

I pray that we may continue to develop this community of faith to be a warm, caring and spiritual body of Christ. Let us be a community that is shaped by discipleship, prayer, study, joyful worship, love and peace. And out of such a community flows compassionate service to those in need, both here and around the world. People who feel alone and somewhat lost will be attracted to this sort of community, just as I was.

**Amen**

