

Life Together Acts 2:22-47

Second Sunday after Pentecost/ 6th June 2021

In 1935, a seminary was established ninety miles northeast of Berlin, in Pomerania (modern day Poland). It was organized as a training center for young pastors of the Confessing Church. When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, through the help, by the way, of Protestants who voted for National Socialism, it became clear that something had to be done to resist the Nazi takeover of the church.¹ Protestants in Germany were comfortable with strong authority figures, as well as a close bond between throne and altar (or table), that went back to the 1870s, to the formation of Germany. In the early 1930s, the German Christians movement (not Christian Germans, but *German* Christians) emerged within Protestant congregations that supported the Nazis. They put together a toxic cocktail of German nationalism, German folk (*Völkish*) religion, more pagan than Christian, and a Protestant antisemitic theological agenda. Many Lutheran and Reformed pastors and churches fell sway to this propaganda. Christian nationalism, wherever it raises its ugly head, is always diabolic.

But there was a minority that knew that the nature of the gospel was at stake and that the work of the church was being corrupted by the German Christians agenda. The Confessing Church emerged as a resistance movement consisting of pastors and congregations that aligned themselves with the gospel and denounced the Nazification of the church. The Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1888-1968), who was teaching at the University of Bonn at the time, was part of the Confessing Church.² In 1934, while attending a Confessing Church conference, Barth wrote the famous [Barmen Declaration](#), which confessed that Jesus Christ alone is Lord and head of the church and not Hitler or any other secular authority. Barmen, now part of the [Constitution of the Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#), continues to guide the church—and it's just as radical today.³ Not long after writing Barmen, Barth was forced to return to Switzerland.

The Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde, situated in an old manor house, was one of a kind. Confessing Church congregations throughout Germany contributed food, furniture, and money for the project. Several months later it became illegal for congregations to take up offerings for Confessing Church causes. A gymnasium was renovated and used as a chapel. The seminary was led by a young Lutheran pastor, a theological rock star named Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). Students came from all over Germany to study under Bonhoeffer—who was 27 at the time. Finkenwalde was both a seminary and a congregation of the Confessing Church. It was unique—and Bonhoeffer was intentional about this—it was a church-community, or, better, it was *community*, a shared life. There was morning and evening worship, time for relaxation, personal Bible study. Bonhoeffer insisted that seminarians spend at least thirty minutes meditating on the Daily Watchwords (*Die Losungen*), daily Bible verses published annually, since 1731, by the Moravian Church.⁴ (The [Daily Watchwords](#) are still available today. I receive mine by email every morning. You may also find them on Twitter.) There was theological debate, singing and worship, and, of course, there were all the frustrations associated with communal living. Finkenwalde provided retreats for pastors and theology students. Pastors and others who had been arrested and beaten by the Nazis took shelter there. Spouses of those victims found support from the seminary. When the Gestapo closed the seminary in September

1937, approximately 113 students and many others experienced a church community—or church as community—a gathering of people committed to serving Christ in a world at odds with the gospel, courageous people seeking to be faithful to God and to one another. Bonhoeffer wrote his classic work *The Cost of Discipleship* for the seminarians, in 1937, as well as the slim volume *Life Together* (1939), a reflection on Christian community. Bonhoeffer, himself, knew in his own life the cost that comes with being a disciple of Christ.⁵

The model for such a community was, of course, the early church, as we hear in Acts 2. But the early church, especially that first church community, didn't have a model to turn to or learn from. There was nothing to compare it to because before that time the world had never seen anything like the church—*ekklesia*—meaning, literally, a group called out, set apart from the crowd for the mission of God. Called out by the Holy Spirit moving among people, the Spirit poured out over a disparate people, with little in common, and then shaped and formed them into a radically new community. Acts says that the Spirit of the Risen Christ blew through the world and was poured out on “all flesh” (Acts 2:17), which then moved Peter to preach the good news of Christ (perhaps the first sermon), calling for repentance, a change of heart and mind, then baptism, becoming immersed in this new movement of God in the world, calling diverse, isolated individuals and joining them together; forming, shaping, loving them into a new people, a new community, *church*. A community of learning and *koinonia*, that is, rich, personal sharing and fellowship, breaking bread, eating together, living together, worshiping together. It's life together—God's life together with our lives, our lives together with the life of God, our lives together with others whose lives are together with God! The Spirit moves and the Word is proclaimed. The Spirit speaks through the Word and when the Word is heard it strikes, cuts (Acts 2:37), and opens our hearts as the Spirit throws us in community. When this happens and every time that it happens a church is born. In every moment of its life the church is sustained by the Spirit as it continues to live and grow and thrive in its mission. Without the Spirit there is no church.

And all of this happens together. Believers in the gospel gather together with other believers. We never believe alone. You cannot be a follower of Christ all by yourself. You cannot serve or live faithfully on your own, without a community. This is a difficult word to hear for us in an age of rampant individualism and toxic selfishness, where people think freedom means you're free to do whatever you want, whenever you want to, with little regard for one's neighbors, lacking concern for the “least of these” (Mt. 25:40), where empathy is in short supply. These attitudes are pervasive in American society these days, in politics, but also sadly among many Christians. Despite this, over the the past fifteen months, the church scattered and apart, we have learned how to do church and be church beyond the sanctuary, despite how much we miss being in the sanctuary. It is possible to be a church without walls and do ministry outside the building. The time apart and separated from one another has taught us, I think (I hope), the value of community and that the community of God's people is truly special, it's a gift. Yes, we have learned that community takes many forms. Yes, we can do a lot and be a community via Zoom, but there's no substitute for being together, for what we experience together and what we can do when we're together.

Acts tells us, “All who believed were together and held all things in common” (Acts 2:44). Common, *koina*, in Greek. The Spirit forms and shapes the place of the common: a

common shared, a communal space of mutual care and service. It's a place of joining: the joining of stories and lives, relationships. All are drawn into the common, into the collective and we are given a new orientation. Time, talent, treasures are pulled into the vortex of the Spirit's common, along with personal hopes and dreams, gifts, experiences, joys and sufferings—all of it is pulled into our common life.⁶ And then life in this common place takes on the look and feel of the Lord: a community shaped by love and grace, compassion and mercy, acceptance, free from judgment and criticism. We enjoy one another's company, presence, and personalities, even with all our shortcomings, strangeness, oddness and idiosyncrasies, all the things that we might find frustrating and annoying in another—and we love, we make space for one another, we reach out toward the other, we consider the needs and hopes and concerns of the other before we demand what we want, what I might want. Community—over time. “Day by day,” the text says, “as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food”—hear the allusion to the Lord's Supper, the sacramental life of the church—“with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2: 26-47)—and note, the *Lord* added, the Lord gave the growth, *not* the church.

Luke depicts a community of people caught up in the love of God. Sure, all of this sounds implausible, given human nature. The collectivism and scent of socialism in the text might give us pause; that kind of “distribution” of goods and wealth doesn't seem “fair.” Perhaps Luke was just trying to paint a rosy picture of things; it could sound like propaganda, unrealistic. The cynic in us might have difficulty taking all of this seriously—*Really, the church? Come one, do you know what they're like? Have you ever been to a church?*

You can take a skeptical approach, of course. It's not helpful in the long run, however, because then you miss out on what Luke is really pointing to here. Theologian Willie James Jennings gets to the heart of what's happening in this text and says so beautifully, “People caught up in the love of God not only began to give thanks for their daily bread, but daily offered to God whatever they had that might speak that gracious love to others. What is far more dangerous than any plan of shared wealth or fair distribution of goods and services is a God who dares impose on us divine love.” This is the real threat—the imposition of divine love. “Such love will not play fair. In the moment we think that something is ours”—*mine!*—“or our people's, that same God will demand that we sell it, give it away, or offer more of it in order to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or shelter the homeless, using it to create the bond of shared life.”⁷ This is what the Spirit unleashes in us—together, as church—and through us and for us when we are caught up and moved by God's love.

With a renewed appreciation for community, it will be interesting to see how the Spirit will shape this congregation. Caught up in the love of God, who knows how the Spirit will move us. How will our life together be shaped by what we have learned about ourselves and about the nature and purpose of the church? What will it mean for us to *be* the church—not *do* church but *be* church—in this new day as we emerge together out from the pandemic—shaken, stunned, maybe even awakened?

My friend Laura Fabrycky was, for a time, one of the guides at the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Haus and Museum in Berlin. I had the opportunity to visit Bonhoeffer's Haus a year ago

February, which was a holy experience for me. In her wonderful book about working at the museum, *Keys to Bonhoeffer's Haus*, Laura tells the story about a visitor who arrived one day with a heavy burden on his heart. A member of a faith community, he said to her, standing in Bonhoeffer's bedroom, next to his bed, "People are so alone these days...It's a huge social need, and it's getting worse. People are lonely. So many people here in Germany live alone and die alone." This this is true throughout Europe and the United States. "We're all so disconnected from each other. Well, actually, we're all 'connected' online, and yet we couldn't be farther from each other," he said. "We're technologically connected to people thousands of miles away, but we don't talk to our living, breathing neighbors right next door! Honestly, we could do a lot of good by just loving the people near us, whoever they are. Just staying curious about their lives. Letting them know they are seen, loved, and belong. That someone cares about them, today. We have to know how much we matter to each other."⁸

Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."

The person who loves those around them.
Having the goodwill of all the people.
Glad and generous hearts.
Together.
In community.
All things in common.
Church.
Come, Holy Spirit.
Come.



Bonhoeffer with students at the Finkelwalde community-seminary-church.

¹ On the Protestant support of National Socialism see Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018).

² On Barth's experience teaching in Bonn, see Angela Dienhart Hancock, *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

³ For more on the Declaration of Barmen see: <https://pres-outlook.org/2009/05/a-conversation-with-the-theological-declaration-of-barmen/>. This article includes a link to the entire Declaration.

⁴ On Bonhoeffer's use of the Watchwords see Laura M. Fabrycky, *Keys to Bonhoeffer's Haus: Exploring the World and Wisdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), 91ff. For more about the Daily Watchwords see: https://www.moravian.org/daily_texts/.

⁵ For an excellent biography of Bonhoeffer see *Charles Marsh, A Strange Glory: The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Vintage Books, 2015). I would avoid the "biography" by Eric Metaxas.

⁶ I'm grateful to Willie James Jennings for this insight. See masterful commentary *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 39.

⁷ Jennings, 40.

⁸ Fabrycky, 215-216.