



## BLEST BE THE TIE THAT BINDS: COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS

Romans 12:3-6

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In Warren's third section of *Better Together* – about Fellowship – he points out that even in the blissful, sinless Garden of Eden it was, as Genesis tells us, not good for us to be alone. We are not only *Better Together* for the practical reasons of security, food procurement, and shared knowledge, but we were made to live out our lives with one another.

In this life there are many things that bind people to each other. Co-workers are bound by their common work. Family is bound by blood. Southerners are bound by culture. Retirees are bound by shared lifestyle and needs and students are bound by their common status. All of these shared traits forge bonds that are, more or less, strong depending upon their intensity and the number of shared groups.

Intensity of the bonds of fellowship can be strengthened by trials. Soldiers who fight alongside one another and share an intense life-or-death moment can become connected to one another for life. This can even happen if they were on opposing sides of the war. Stories abound of enemies meeting fifty years later and reuniting in tears.

But it can be shared experiences of joy and triumph that draw us together as well. A few years ago my high school basketball team, which was the first one to win the big tournament, swapped stories of blocked shots and three-point bombs with great bravado. Simply reciting past events drew us closer.

The fellowship and the friendships that are most powerful and enduring often have a shared event like war or the basketball victory.

As Christians, our shared event is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it is something much deeper. It is not only the memory

of a past event, but the living Christ whom we continue to experience and share.

Yet it is so easy for us to lose sight of this bond of fellowship we have because we are so immersed in it. Like a fish that does not know it is wet and fails to connect to other fish. The Gospel is our water in which we swim; we gain our oxygen from it; we move through it from place to place; it supports our energy and our existence; and without it we soon suffocate. Our shared event is a living, life-giving thing because we worship a living God.

As Bonhoeffer wrote

Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

It is important to have clear understanding of the Biblical notion of fellowship. It is not simply coffee, donuts, and who is going to win the Clemson/Carolina game! But scripture discloses some crucial aspects of God's intentions for our life together.

The word we translate as fellowship in the Greek is *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*). Throughout the New Testament this word is variously translated as fellowship, sharing, communion, contribution, participation, and partnership. While it does include our notion of fellowship as "friendly association" it goes many layers deeper.

A diagram in the *Concordia Journal* by Lutheran Seminary professor Jeffrey Kloha explains: *Koinonia* is a multi-dimensional concept. First there is the *koinos* at the center – the thing that

people share in common, for example the Jerusalem Offering. Gathered around the *koinos* are the *koinonos*, the co-participants, that is the people. There is a dynamic exchange that occurs from the co-participants to the thing in common. The entire diagram and all the connections is *koinonia*. This means that Biblical fellowship always includes a dynamic exchange from people, a common purpose, and the relationships forged around this common purpose.

The best way to understand Biblical fellowship is around the Table.

When we refer to The Lord's Supper as "communion" or "*Table fellowship*" we do so with *koinonia* in mind. The thing in common, the *koinos*, is not only the bread and wine but also the table itself. For the table by its very nature gathers people around it. Of course at the center of the table is our Lord Jesus Christ.

Think about what that meal meant for the disciples. This gift Jesus gave them of holy remembrance would be the quintessential moment in their life together with Jesus. Sharing a meal is the most fundamental of human fellowship activities and having it transformed into something that gives life beyond the sustenance of the meal is a sacred act.

The Roman Catholics refer to this sacrament as the "source and summit" of our faith. It is the source because in it we receive the promise of Christ, straight from His own mouth as His friends. In it we receive His body and His blood as a mysterious gift by the power of the Holy Spirit. We do it not as individuals, that is why it is called Communion. It is Communion with our Lord, but also with each other as the disciples first received it.

It is the summit of our faith because it is a taste of our *Life Together* in the time to come. As the people of God, our destiny is to gather around our Lord, as we gather around the table in friendship, love, and worship of our God. When we receive communion we remind ourselves that this

*koinonia* is not just fellowship with those physically present but "with the saints from every time and place, who forever sing to the glory of Thy name".

We can immerse ourselves in fullness of our fellowship by imagining everything we do takes place around this table with Jesus at the center. All of us have our eyes turned toward Him, taking our direction, our hope, our passion from Him. Then, as each of us are connected to Him, we reach our arms out to each other – bound to one another as our eyes are fixed on Christ, being nourished by His life.

When I sit down with you at WAF, I can feel Christ among us; feeding us, loving us. When I meet with you to plan the budget, to discuss worship, Jesus is sitting right there. When you come to plan Sunday School classes, Jesus is listening. When you cook food for the homeless, He is smelling the sweet aroma of brotherly and sisterly love. And when our children explode watermelons and race to put on frozen T-Shirts, we can hear His laughter. Since wherever two or more are gathered, He is in our midst; every time we are together is a sacred moment of Holy fellowship to be treasured. There is a certain delight, a joy, that wells from the depths of my being when I experience our *Life Together* as sacred fellowship, when I realize I am a fish in Gospel water and I get chills as if I've been swimming in the ocean.

This fellowship, the depth of connection and community forged by our common calling by Christ, is as real as it gets in this world and more powerful than any human difference.

One of the most powerful examples for me took place at the Birmingham General Assembly for our denomination. One of our military chaplains, David Terrononi was serving communion to a Christian from one of the countries behind the communist wall. Here is his story:

"Tom,

The most powerful moment for me was after the Sunday worship service. I was assigned to

serve communion to the international representatives on the main floor. I was in uniform. After the service, a gentleman with a heavy accent told me that my serving him communion was very emotional for him because "our two countries are enemies." He said "You are an US Air Force chaplain and you served me communion as a brother in Christ." And then, he embraced me. It was very moving and humbling because he is the moderator of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Havana, Cuba.

This is a good synopsis of our conversation. I saw him a couple days later and he immediately greeted me with, "There's my chaplain friend..." This is still a very powerful experience for me; reinforcing the strength of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to cross all boundaries."

What a fellowship, what a diving joy, when together we lean on the everlasting arms of our almighty God!