

Thankfulness In Community and the Idolatry of the Perfect Church
I Thessalonians 5:15-18

We begin our Season of Grace today and its theme: The Renewal of Community. And we begin it with thankfulness for our community of faith. The *utter grace* of church and community is something we sometimes take for granted, then when it is taken away from us by illness or age or distance we discover how much we have loved and needed it.

God has made us to be in community. When God said to Adam, “It is not good that man should be alone”, I think God had more than Eve in mind. I think God had our need for community in mind too.

So here is where we start, with thankful hearts for the gift of community.

I

Paul urges us on with these words, from I Thessalonians:

Rejoice always

pray without ceasing

give thanks in all circumstances

for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

We may not be able to pull this off all the time, but it is God’s will, God’s desire for us. God’s “plan for our lives”, to use an old religious phrase, is gratitude.

In Wendell Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter*, Hannah is looking back on her long life. She says

You musn't want to be somebody else. What you must do is this: "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks."

Then she adds:

I am not all the way capable of so much, but these are the right instructions.¹

So let's begin thinking about thankfulness in church and about the idolatry of the perfect church which keeps us from being thankful.

II

Dietrick Bonhoeffer was young German theologian who had become increasingly active in opposing Hitler. In a few short years he would be executed under orders from Hitler.

The German church as a whole had fallen under the thrall of Hitler and the Third Reich. They were called "The Reich Church". A small minority of churches and Christians withdrew from the Reich Church to form what they called the "Confessing Church". What they confessed together was that Jesus Christ, not Hitler, was Lord. As you might have guessed, this meant the fracturing of churches and relationships in churches. The loss of community.

In 1935 Bonhoeffer helped form a small seminary to train pastors for the Confessing Church movement. It would not last long before Hitler's government shut it down.

There in Finkenwald Bonhoeffer shaped a spiritual community based not only on theological instruction but also daily and weekly spiritual practices. He wrote of these practices in the book *Life Together*. The first chapter was on "Community". He wrote:

It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brothers [and sisters] is a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God that any day maybe taken from us....Therefore let those who...have had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of their hearts....It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers [and sisters]. ²

Then a few pages later he writes:

In Christian community thankfulness is just what it is anywhere else in the Christian life. Only the ones who give thanks for the little things receive the big things....We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet not really small) gifts....If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even when

there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we have expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow accordingly to the measure of riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ. ³

Then he turns to the pastors (uh oh) and says that we should not complain about our congregations either. “A congregation has not been entrusted to him”, Bonhoeffer writes, “in order that he should become its accuser before God and [others].”⁴

For 45 years as a pastor I have taken all these words to heart, even as I have failed them some days. As Hannah Coulter said, “I am not all the way capable of so much, but these are the right instructions.”

So what do we do when crankiness and complaining enter our hearts? We start giving thanks for those in the congregation who bring thankfulness to our hearts. We bring them to mind. And we give thanks for the things the church is doing that bring thanks to our lips. Then, then we pray for the thankfulness to grow. This prayer is sure to be answered for such is God’s will for us.

III

I now turn to one thing that can cut our thankfulness off at the quick: the idolatry of the perfect church. Carlyle Marney said once that he spent so much time looking for the perfect church that he almost missed the real one in front of him.

Bonhoeffer calls this our “wish-dream” for church. Our “wish-dreams” for church are more our wishes than God’s wishes for our church. These can become an idol. And if the idol is knocked off the mantle and smashes to the ground, we should give thanks here too, for then the real community, the one God is giving to us, can happen.

In Richard Rohr’s early life as a Franciscan priest, he helped form an intentional community of Christians living together as church. Over these years he experienced the beauty of community and the dangers of it, that is, the things that can kill it. He said that most communities go through three stages: 1)Pseudo-Community; 2)Chaos; and 3)Real Community.

Pseudo-Community is what we pretend to be, our idealized picture of ourselves. We live as if it is perfect, or near perfect. But it has not been tested.

Then Chaos comes along and demolishes our idealized community, our pseudo-community, our “wish-dream” community.

Then, if we are brave enough and faithful enough we move into real Community, warts and all, and begin to be the community God is making us to be. Some communities do not make it to the third stage. They cannot make it through the chaos. Despair takes over.

One thing that helps a community get there, through chaos to real community, is daily thankfulness for the small, but not really small gifts of community we have every day.

Sometimes some grief-work is needed. Our wish-dream has died, and we do not know what to do. We feel real sadness. Sometimes anger arises to cover the grief we are experiencing. Our grief-work will help us let go of our fanciful dreams and move into the future God has for us.

In the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno's classic, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, he writes:

I am convinced that we should solve many things if we went out into the streets and uncovered our griefs, which perhaps would prove to be one sole common grief, and joined together in beweeeping them and crying aloud to the heavens and calling upon God.⁵

He calls it "the Common Weeping". That's where churches go in some seasons of their life together. Some wishes cannot succeed. Some victories cannot be won.

We are here together not to make it perfect, but to make it better, and to make our community a good home for all.

I've been the pastor of six churches, staying one step ahead of the sheriff: A small tobacco farming community church in Kentucky with an old one room schoolhouse kind of church building where one of the boys took the responsibility of picking up a mouse by the tail when it ran across the floor in worship. A medium-sized blue collar/white collar church in Asheville called Beverly Hills Baptist Church, but Beverly Hills, California it was not. A large church next to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary which was filled with seminary professors and students. A large center-city church in Ft. Worth Texas with a cross section of the city in its members, including professors and students at the nearby seminary, Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, a largely professional class church with progressive theology. And this beloved congregation called Grace, small in size but big in heart.

Each of them has been beautiful to me in their own unique ways. I have stayed a pastor for 45 years and not gone into an academic career because I love church, and I love churches in all shapes, sized and flavors. They all had their own unique challenges as they sought to be what God was calling them to be. They all had to wrestle with their wish-dreams which sometimes got in the way of what God was calling them to be in Christ. But God loves them all, and I do too.

Wendell Berry writes:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Let's roll up our sleeves and make our impeded stream sing.

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1. Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (San Francisco: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), p.113
 2. Dietrick Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1954),p.20
 3. Ibid., p.27
 4. Ibid.
 5. Miguel Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (N.Y.: Dove Publications, 1954),p.17.