

Life Together – Apart
 I Corinthians 1:1-11; Ephesians 6:18-20
 Sixth Sunday of Easter, (May 17) 2020
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*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.*

-Wendell Berry

In April 1944, from a Nazi prison Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter in which he said, “What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or **who is Christ actually for us today?** The age when we could tell people that with words – whether with theological or pious words – is past...” (*Letter*, April 30, 1944).

Bonhoeffer’s question: “Who is Christ actually for us today?” is one that keeps gnawing at me, as well. For Bonhoeffer, throughout the 1930’s in Germany, had called for the church to be the church of Jesus Christ – to be Christ-like and not fuehrer-like, to live sacrificially instead of selfishly, to be with those who suffered instead of being bystanders or inflicting suffering, and to receive others, the stranger, and the outcast in hospitality instead of excluding. Bonhoeffer was the first to call the church in Nazified church to speak out for the Jews. As he said, “He who does not cry out for the Jew, may not sing Gregorian chants.” Or as we might put it today, “Only those who cry out for those in detention camps along the border may sing ‘Amazing Grace’ or sing praise songs.”

Between 1935-1937 Bonhoeffer had decided that the only way to be the faithful Christ-like church was to form small disciplined communities of faith

outside the standard church structures, so he led a small alternative seminary training pastors to read the Sermon on the Mount, as well as learning to pray and sing the Psalms. It was during this time, he wrote *Life Together*, which we studied together a few years ago. Unfortunately, after 1937 the seminary was shut down by the Gestapo and all the students and teachers were either arrested and put in concentration camps, sent to the Army, or exiled and scattered. In April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned and in April 1945 he was hanged by direct order from Hitler.

Bonhoeffer asks from prison – asks us – “Who is Christ actually for us today?” What is the church today? What does it look like to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ today, in these times? Back in the late 1970’s theologian and lawyer, William Stringfellow wrote an important little book called *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. Well, if it was strange then, how much more is it strange today – a strange land and an even stranger time. Who is Christ actually for us in these strange times and strange land?

I confess that asking these questions is deeply personal for me. For forty years of ministry, thirty of them here with you at Austin Heights, I have read, reflected, learned, taught, preached, that to follow Jesus Christ means to live Christ out in the flesh and to live Christ out together in community. Furthermore, for white American Christians this is a challenge to our overwhelming individualism and overly spiritualized faith, that says being Christian is all about “me and Jesus” and “getting saved.” For most white American evangelicals that means that everything else is determined by such things as nationalism, capitalism, and racism. Much of white American evangelical faith is about me, my, and mine. In contrast to all of that, Christ calls us to another Way, the Way of Christ –

embodied and in community, always for the other. I still believe that, and I believe that it is part of what the doctrine of Incarnation means.

But for the last two months we find ourselves not in community but sheltering in place largely apart from one another. And for many of us, rather than practicing our faith out in the world, we find ourselves turning inward. It is true, that we are not forced to isolate ourselves from each other, and from others, but we isolate because we believe that such a sacrifice is what is needed these days as a way to love our neighbors and care about others. This is not simply so we can keep from getting COVID-19, but so we can keep from being carriers who might inadvertently infect our neighbors.

Bonhoeffer is one of the people I've gone to in these strange days in a strange land. He believed and practiced that the Living Christ was embodied in the community of Christ, the church and that such a church was a church for others lived out in the world. Then he spent two years in prison, isolated, separated, and alone while the small church he knew and believed in was scattered by the Nazis. During those two years he wrote and practiced his discipleship as best as he could under the circumstances.

Today I want to talk about how, under these circumstances of COVID-19 and shelter-in-place, separated from one another, we might not only practice our discipleship, but also, better prepare ourselves for the future in front of us.

My old teacher, Fred Craddock, told a story years ago about visiting a lady in his church who was facing surgery and was in the hospital. She had never been in the hospital before and the surgery was major. He said, "I walked in there. She

was a nervous wreck, and she started crying. She wanted me to pray with her, which I did. By her bed there was a stack of books and magazines: *True Love*, *Mirror*, *Hollywood Today*, stuff about [movie stars] and such. She had a stack of them there, and she was a wreck. It occurred to me, *There's not a calorie in that whole stack to help her through her experience*. She had no place to dip down into a reservoir and come up with something – a word, a phrase, a thought, an idea, a memory, a person. Just empty” (from *Craddock Stories*, p. 30).

As your pastor, I want us to have some resources that will get us through this experience and then, empower us embody the Living Christ in this world in the days to come.

The Bible and Christian history are full of exemplars of our faith, who under difficult circumstances, found ways to not only survive but to thrive in Christ. Joseph in the book of Genesis was cast out by his brothers, sold into slavery, spent time in prison in Egypt, before God used him. Moses spent forty years in the wilderness tending sheep. After a big victory over the false prophets and King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the prophet Elijah found himself on the run, alone, depressed way out in the middle of nowhere, seeking God, seeking a word, and learned to receive that word from God in the still, small voice of silence. Daniel was thrown into the lion's den, and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace. Jeremiah was thrown into prison. Over in the New Testament John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod. The Apostle John was exiled by Caesar and alone on the Island of Patmos, and the Apostle Paul was thrown into prison time and time again by everyone.

Our brief scripture readings today are from Paul. Both were written while he was isolated, in prison – either in Caesarea or in Rome. First, notice Paul used the communication technology available at the time, to write letters. He wrote at least two letters to the church in Corinth, a big, deep letter to the church in Rome. He wrote to congregations in Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. And in those letters, he refers to other letters he wrote. Rather than turn inward, Paul was thinking, praying, and looking and writing outward, encouraging, staying in touch, teaching, and reminding folks that they were all connected.

He tells the Corinthian church, a congregation that was always fighting and struggling, to be consoled in their affliction. God brings them consolation, comfort, and patience. Patience, remember, has to do with giving up control. We let go and let God. And it is a daily practice. Paul talks about his own despair and his struggle as the power of Death hovered over him. But then he says that he learned to rely on, “God who raises the dead. He, who rescues us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again” (II Cor. 1:9-10).

To the Ephesians, Paul ends his letter with a resounding call to pray for each other. He asks them to pray for him, as he prays for them. Paul confesses that he is an ambassador of the gospel in chains but asks that they pray that he will continue to declare the gospel boldly.

Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, “A Christian community either lives by the intercessory prayers of its members for one another, or the community will be destroyed.” He goes on, “How does that happen? Offering intercessory prayer means nothing other than Christians bringing one another into the presence of God,

seeing each other under the cross of Jesus as poor human beings and sinners in need of grace. Then, everything about other people that repels me falls away. Then I see them in all their need, hardship, and distress” (*Life Together*, p. 90).

For Bonhoeffer, and for the Apostle Paul, even separation by long distances or iron bars, the Spirit of the Living Christ still connects us to one another. We are not alone. The Living God is with us. Both Paul and Bonhoeffer wrote letters to encourage one another and praying for others, as well as asking for prayers.

There are not many of us today who write hand-written letters anymore and put them in an envelope and drop them in the mailbox, but we do email, texting, Facebook messaging, phone calls, and Zoom and Facetime. In other words, do not give up in being in touch with one another by one medium or another. Do not give up praying for one another. The Living God walks with and among us no matter how much we are separated or why.

Frederick Douglas was speaking to an audience in Boston about slavery and racism and what he considered the dimming hopes of emancipation. There in the audience was Sojourner Truth, tall and attentive, sitting on the front row. Douglas grew more despairing as he spoke. He had little hope that emancipation could be accomplished and the only thing coming was violence and bloodshed. When he sat down, the entire hall fell into a tense hush. Then in her deep and commanding voice, Sojourner Truth spoke a sentence heard all over the room: “Frederick, is God dead?” (cited in Tom Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*).

Sisters and brothers, God is not dead. The Living God known through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ walks among us, is with us, binds us together

as one body even though we are separated, and not only comforts us but also prepares us to deepen our reservoirs.

While in prison, Bonhoeffer wrote about returning to what he called the “arcane disciplines” of the Christian faith. He was referring to the ancient practice in Christianity sometimes called the “disciplines in secret” or “the mysteries.” Though it sounds strange to our contemporary ears, what Bonhoeffer was talking about while isolated and in prison, was the practice of prayer, scripture reading, singing hymns, and so on, that you don’t do out in public as if you’re putting on a show. There are some deep, even intimate practices and disciplines that we do quietly, alone, in humility (see *Letter*, April 30, 1944).

Bonhoeffer was afraid that his imprisonment could lead to self-absorption, self-pity, and self-focus and few things bothered him more. Like his sometimes mentor and friend, Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer could not stand a pious individualized faith of navel gazing selfishness. For both of them, following Jesus was not about me, myself, and I! It is not about “What I want” or “My religious liberty to worship God like I want, when I want.”

Both Bonhoeffer and Barth believed that true prayer, even private, intimate prayer propelled one in service to the world. It propelled one to thinking of others, serving others, and seeking the welfare of others. Not self.

Next Sunday we’ll look more at what we do and what we have to say once we go out to this strange land and strange time.

Some of us are alone these days while others of us are with someone else, or perhaps we have a house full. Some of us have children whom we are trying to home-school while keeping on doing our jobs from home. Others of us are desperately looking for employment. But I urge all of us, to devote some time each day to quiet, intimate prayer, scripture reading (read the Psalms; read the Sermon on the Mount), sing hymns, and learn to sit still and be silent while thinking about what you've just read. Practice this alone and perhaps start teaching your children how to do the same. Lift up each other in prayer. Some of you are veterans of doing this, while for others of you this is new. Start where you are, even if it is only for a few minutes each day. The main thing is shoot for consistency not length. The length will come on its own if you stick with it.

Who is Christ actually for us today?" What might Christ look like in this strange land and strange time? How will we change? Adapt? How do we stay faithful disciples where everything seems to be changing? Some of this takes discernment – listening to God and listening to God through each other, and listening to Scripture. For the time being, that likely means private prayer and Zooming with one another. Nevertheless, God calls us to listen. To be quiet. The psalmist says, "The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge... Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:6-7,10).

To put it more bluntly, when we are shut down, and shut in, it is time to shut up and listen.

Another story from Dr. Craddock: He tells of a freshman college student coming to see him in his office. She said, "I was a failure in my classes; I wasn't

having any dates; I didn't have as much money as the other students. I was just so lonely and depressed and homesick and not succeeding. One Sunday afternoon," she said, "I went to the river near the campus. I had climbed up on the rail and was looking into the dark waters below. For some reason or another I thought of the line, 'Cast all your cares upon him for he cares for you.'" She said, "I stepped back, and here I am."

Dr. Craddock said, "Where did you learn that line?"

She said, "I don't know."

"Do you go to church?"

"No... Well, when I visited my grandmother in the summers, we went to Sunday School and church."

Dr. Craddock said, "Ah..." (from *Craddock Stories*, p. 33).

Living in a strange land during these strange days, sometimes I feel as if almost everyone is climbing up on that rail and looking into the waters below. But when the pressure is great, is there a line that comes to us? Perhaps a line of scripture? A line from an old hymn? A Psalm? Something we learned in Sunday School or church? Do we have the resources down deep from which we can draw hope and courage?

But here's the thing. Maybe the whole world – or at least our small part of it – is up on that rail looking down into the waters. Do we have a word, a line that we can share with them? We, and small communities of faith like ours, might be the only resource this old world has.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

