

Koinonia – Church, Community, Communion, Compassion

I Corinthians 1:4-9

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*Every time I think of you - and I think of you often! - I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus. There's no end to what has happened in you - it's beyond speech, beyond knowledge. 6 The evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives. Just think - you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are fulfilled. The Holy One, the Beloved, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, **shares with us the life** of Jesus. God will never give up on you.*

I Corinthians 1:4-9 The Message

*9 God is faithful; **you were called into the fellowship** of Jesus the Christ. I Cor. 1:9 NRSV*

The church. Our church. You don't have to look too far in recent studies, articles and books to see that there are fewer and fewer people who say they go to church, let alone belong to a church, let alone are active in a church. The institution of the church in all its variations has been changing in the United States for a few decades. The pandemic created a whole new wave of people who stopped going when everything was shut down and then never went back, in person or online.

And we don't need to look too far for the ways people as a whole are less connected to one another. Studies show people are more lonely than they used to be. We are more connected through technology and yet less meaningful and sustaining connections.

We look at what people join – groups, places, experiences. A friend joked the other day – “I joined Costco the other day. Now I am a member. The message I got was – Congratulations! You are important! Now you are a member of our special club.” People follow each other on social media. That is a different kind of group. We may be part of different groups – book groups, hiking groups, the Y, climate change, support groups.... They have importance and value. So there are some ways we and people do join groups or organizations.

What is the church? How is it the same or different from other groups or experiences?

Quotes

Leo Durocher – *Baseball is like church. Many attend, few understand.*

Annie Dillard - *On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing*

on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

So here we are. On a Sunday morning in church or worshipping online. Seeing long time friends and welcoming new friends and guests. What is our church, the church and how might we frame it as we celebrate the past year and move into the future? Let's start with a word.

Koinonia

Koinonia. It is a form of the Greek word κοινωνία, which refers to concepts such as fellowship, joint participation, partnership, the share which one has in anything, a gift jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution. In the Politics of Aristotle it is used to mean a community of any size from a single family to a polis. In later Christianity, it identifies the idealized state of fellowship and unity that should exist within the Christian church, the Body of Christ.

The essential meaning of the *koinonia* embraces concepts conveyed in the English terms community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy. In English translations, it can be translated "fellowship" "sharing" and "participation" and "contribution."

Our passage today uses the word Koinonia in the context of sharing in relationships with people and being in relation rooted in the presence of Christ. Called into this community because of the experience of Christ's love and grace and presence.

In Acts 2:42, it is used in the context of being in relation to other Christian siblings, their sufferings and the faith. It points to a common life, a shared life. *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

I'm thankful for the church, however imperfect, that has welcomed me and my seeking, evolving spiritual life and faith. Before we get too far this morning with the pastor celebrating all the good of the church, we should never ignore the church's faults and failures. We should name them, own them, repent of them, and do what we can to correct them. Losing our illusions about church (dis-illusionment) is necessary and good.

What are some images that remind us of what the church today as we look back and look forward at the annual meeting?

Walter Bruggeman – ([The Prophetic Imagination](#))

The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and expresses hope in a society that lives in despair.

The church is like a web of hope.

About 2 years ago we had a series on science and faith. I loved working on it. One of my sermons was on Quantum Physics. I learned about how this new model says reality is like a web, we are all interconnected in a luminous web. Yes, let's be a church of the luminous web of hope with Divine Mystery weaving us together.

The church is like a rope of hope. Why would I say that? Because of Hebrew word for hope. Qahvah קָוָה A word that means “to bind together by twisting threads into a cord or rope, to expect, to gather together, to wait for, expectantly.” We are a people who take our ordinary threads and twist them together into a strong cord, a strong rope, of hope.

The church is a place of hope and unity in the midst of diversity. Paul often uses the word Koinonia and calls the church in Rome to live in unity, despite their differences and their challenges. Whether Jew or Gentile, Republican or Democrat, Giants or Dodgers fans, 49ers fan or... okay only 49er fans —whatever might separate us, taking us away from community, taking us away from worshiping God together—we are called to join together to hope. Paul's words in Romans 15: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

The church is like being on a sailboat and we are the crew.

Last May and June we explored different aspects of being a sailboat church and what it has to do with actual sailing. We started with the message that as we deepen our connection to God and each other, we come to see that we were created to sail. This invitation means we are not simply to get in the rowboats of life and settle for life alone that relies on our ego strength. No, we were created by the source of Divine and made to sail. We come to know how to sail by exploring the life of Jesus, stories of the Bible, and other religious traditions.

And we experience the sailing life, this traveling together in community, as a church. We reflected on what it means to be the crew on a sailboat church – all of us are needed. We have reflected on the mystery of the Spirit, the wind, that moves us and in us. And we considered our Church. A community of deep belonging. Being a body with different parts and working together, a living body of Christ. We need to raise our sails, our many different sails of ministries and what new ones may be added.

The church is like Ubuntu

In Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future without Forgiveness*, he describes the astounding work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He talks about an African concept from the Bantu language of South Africa that is deeply theological and profound, Ubuntu. He describes Ubuntu as, “the essence of being human.” Tutu says,

Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity.

We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.

The church is a place for storytelling and being storytellers.

I want to close with a story told by a friend Maren Tirabassi. I will need your help to tell the story so be ready. It is a story, a parable, about what koinonia looks like.

There was a time when Rabbit and Turtle were walking together and their friend Skunk was there too. Turtle and Rabbit came to a small creek ...

"What are we going to do? said Turtle to Rabbit? "I can walk in the mud without getting stuck, and then swim if it gets deep."

"I can hop over it easily," said Rabbit to Turtle.

They came to a stream. "I can swim through this one," said Turtle "Where are you going rabbit?!!"

"I need a running start to get over this one." and Rabbit leaped so far it could have been a river! Finally, they came to ... a lake. Turtle said, "I can still swim across it, but unless you grow wings, rabbit, you cannot make it."

"I can't go" said Rabbit, very dejected. "Tell me what you see over there, Turtle, when you come this way again."

"I'll stay with you, Rabbit." And Turtle sat down.

Rabbit said, "Skunk would you ask the forest creatures for advice."

"Yes," said Turtle. "Skunk, please ask the forest creatures what we should do."

Look. Skunk is writing a message in the sand. Forest creatures, what should Turtle and Rabbit do now? What does the words say that Skunk made? Let's read it together.

RABBIT CAN CLIMB ON TURTLE'S BACK AND THEY GO OVER TOGETHER.

What did you say?

RABBIT CAN CLIMB ON TURTLE'S BACK AND THEY GO OVER TOGETHER.

Maren offered this story in church one Sunday. And then on Monday morning, the Spirit was still moving. She writes – "On Monday Rabbit and Turtle taught me this prayer."

God, remind us to travel together,
people, nations, all of living, growing creation ... together.
Remind me to become friends,
with those who have not been my friends,
with those I dislike without knowing them,
with those I have never met,
for the greatest chasms are not between us
but ahead of us.

Some days I need to offer to stay behind.
Some days a friend is a raft to carry me
and some days I need to remember,
that the leaps I never thought I could make
will teach me more about You.
You are always with us. Amen. (1)

1) Casa : An Experiment in Doing Church Online · Maren Tirabassi · August 15, 2023