

Devotions – March 21-27, 2021

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Earlier this year I led a weekly discussion on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, *Life Together*, which is based on lectures given to students of an underground seminary in Germany during the Nazi era. Eventually the seminary was closed down and Bonhoeffer, who was a Lutheran pastor and theologian, was arrested and placed in several concentration camps. He was executed on April 9, 1945 at Flossenburg Camp. These devotions are inspired by some of his writings.*
*(*Biblical quotes are from the NRSV; Bonhoeffer quotes are from Life Together, copyright 1954, Harper and Row. They reflect the masculine verbiage of the times.)*

Sunday, March 21, 2021 - Christ’s Call

Text: Matthew 16:24-25

(Jesus) ***“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”***

Text: Philippians 1:21

(Paul) ***“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”***

These verses are a call to all Christians to follow Jesus in the way of suffering for others. Today we would call that counterintuitive. According to conventional wisdom, we need to put our own needs first and others second. However, Jesus warns that holding on tightly to our way of life is like squeezing a living creature too tightly. If we don’t loosen up and let go, it will die. Those who can “let go and let God”, will have life abundant.

Bonhoeffer: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” *Written six years before his imprisonment by the Gestapo.* (L.T. Introduction p. 8)

Let us pray.... *Dear Lord Jesus, so often I would rather save my life than lose it for you. Give me courage and compassion that I may each day turn over a little more of my life to you and be of service to those in need. Amen*

Monday, March 22, 2021: Chapter One - “Community”

Text: Psalm 133:1

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

Text: Matthew 18:20

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (even on Zoom!)

During this year of COVID-19 pandemic, we have all learned how much community means to us. Isolation, separation (social distancing), being hidden by masks, have all taken a toll. This has been a high price, but necessary cost, in order to try to keep ourselves, our loved ones and our community protected from this dread disease. Separation from our Christian family has given us even more anxiety and loss as we have not been able to gather in person to participate in faith practices such as worship, singing, sharing the Lord’s Supper and potluck dinners. Bonhoeffer reminds us that our true unity comes through Jesus Christ who was obedient to paying the high, but necessary, cost of giving his life. By his sacrifice, we have hope in the promise of God’s presence with us in all circumstances.

Bonhoeffer: “It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies.” (L.T. p. 17)

“It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us....” (L.T. p. 20)

Let us pray.... *Precious Jesus, our brother and Savior, you showed us the way of putting God first in our lives and loving our neighbor. We yearn for the day when we can once more experience Koinonia, Christian community, in its fullest. Until then, bind us together by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen*

Tuesday, March 23, 2021: Chapter Two - “The Day With Others”

Text: Colossians 3:16

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”

Text: Ephesians 4:26-27

“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”

Our days with others have been severely disrupted this year. I give thanks for the “miraculous” technology advancements of smart phones, computers, You Tube, and Zoom as well as the conventional communications of letter and card writing and calling to actually talk to someone on the phone. We have been forced to become creative in reaching out to family and friends such as holding auto parades and converting Little Libraries to Little Food Pantries. I hope we will be a “new creation in Christ” when this pandemic is over.

Bonhoeffer: “The Psalter (Psalms) is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word.” (L.T. p.46) “The psalms teach us to pray as a fellowship. The Body of Christ is praying, and as an individual, one acknowledges that his prayer is only a minute fragment of the whole prayer of the Church.” (L.T. pp. 48-49)

“So long as we eat our bread together, we shall have sufficient even with the least. Not until one person desires to keep his own bread for himself does hunger ensue. This is a strange divine law.” (L.T. p.69)

Let us pray.... *Thank you, O God, for the many ways you have shown us to continue to be connected to one another during this time of separation. May these times be a blessing as we have been brought closer to you. Amen*

Wednesday, March 24, 2021 Chapter Three - “The Day Alone”

Text: Philippians 4:6

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Text: II Corinthians 5:17

“So, if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

We all know a lot more about “The Day Alone” than most of us could have imagined a year ago. A message posted on outdoor Church signs has said, “While being socially distanced, draw closer to God.” Hopefully we have done that, but I know I have not accomplished nearly as much as I had hoped I would in all the projects to be done, books to be read, etc. Bonhoeffer stresses that a balance must be struck between being alone and being with others. While alone, it is important to realize that we really are surrounded by God’s presence and the mystical gathering of the communion of saints.

Bonhoeffer: “One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair. Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.” (L.T. p. 78)

Let us pray.... *O God of love, surround those who are alone because of life’s circumstances or necessity to avoid illness, with a sense of your presence. Help me to reach out to the alone, the lonely, and those to whom I need to be reconciled. Let your love fill me and flow through me. Amen*

Thursday, March 25, 2021: Chapter Four - “Ministry”

Text: 1 Peter 3:15

“Always be prepared to make defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

Text: Matthew 7:12

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the

prophets.”

“Everyone a Minister” is the title of a book that was popular long ago when I was in seminary. It emphasized the calling we all have to serve God in whatever capacity we are able, with all of the gifts and talents God has given us. Of course, Martin Luther was big on this also. As listed below, I would not have thought to expand “ministry” to include some of the categories that Bonhoeffer did. Take time to reflect upon these. What other ministries would you add to the list?

Bonhoeffer includes these subtitles in this chapter: The Ministry of Holding One’s Tongue, The Ministry of Meekness, The Ministry of Listening, The Ministry of Helpfulness, The Ministry of Bearing, The Ministry of Proclaiming.

Let us pray... *God our creator, you created us in your image to be ministers to each other and to be your hands and voice in the world. Guide us to discover the talents or purposes to which you are calling us. Embolden us to use them. Amen*

Friday, March 26, 2021: Chapter Five - “Confession”

Text: Mark 2:17b

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Text: 1 John 1:7

“but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Confession and forgiveness, it seems to me, is what Lent is all about. I tell my confirmation students that Luther felt so strongly about confession that he made it a half-sacrament. We Lutherans may have “missed the boat” when it comes to making greater use of in-person individual confession and absolution. Sometimes it just helps to hear a voice say out loud, and directly to you, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to have a hand you can grasp for reassurance in order to believe it. However, let there be no doubt that we trust and believe in the forgiveness of sin by the free and gracious love of God. We can begin each day anew, as children reconciled to our Heavenly Father.

Bonhoeffer: “You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; He loves the sinner but He hates sin.” (L.T. p. 111)

“In confession the Christian begins to forsake his sins. Their dominion is broken.” (L.T. p. 115)

Let us pray... *I thank you, Heavenly Father, that you loved me and the whole world so much that you sent your dear Son to die for us. May I treasure in my heart the forgiveness of my sins that I*

can begin each day a new creation in Christ Jesus, my Lord. Amen

Saturday, March 27, 2021: Chapter Five - "Communion"

Text: John 6:35

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:26

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Oh! the divisions that have been created over this Holy Sacrament meant to create communion with God and with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Oh! how we have fasted from this meal in the past year like never before in my recollection. All the more precious it will be when we gather together once more in Christian fellowship as the visible body of Christ. "Given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sin," are sweet words of love and promise we look forward to hearing as we enter into Holy Week and prepare to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus.

Bonhoeffer: "The day of the Lord's Supper is an occasion of joy for the Christian community. Reconciled in their hearts with God and the brethren, the congregation receives the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and receiving that, it receives forgiveness, new life, and salvation... The life of Christians together under the Word has reached its perfection in the sacrament." (L.T. p.122)

Let us pray... *God of steadfast love, at this table you gather your people into one body for the sake of the world. Send us in the power of your Spirit, that our lives may bear witness to the love that has made us new in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen***

*(** Post Communion prayer for Lent from Sundays and Seasons-Augsburg Fortress-2020.)*