

Inaugural Address: *Life Together @ 80: What Dietrich Bonhoeffer Might Say about Building Community Today*

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I am so grateful to be with all of you today. I especially want to recognize the Benton Family and we have four generations here: Suzanne Benton, her children Susan and Barbara, granddaughter Kate, and great-granddaughter, Anna (age 7 months). Thank you for your generosity to the field of educational ministry in both your financial and personal contributions to this discipline of Christian education. I'm also so grateful to my family and friends who have traveled to be here today and for students past and present, who have come to celebrate.

So to begin...I have a confession to make. I fell in love during my doctoral program with a man that I have never met. In fact, he had been dead for sixty years when I first became immersed in his writings. The more that I read about his life and work, the more that I found resonances with things that were important to me regarding faith and educational practice. I'm sure you've already guessed, since you received an invitation to this event, that my seminary crush was none other than Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

My reading of Bonhoeffer's works began with his *Ethics*, but I quickly became fascinated with the man behind the book. I noted that my classmates on both sides of the theological spectrum seemed to respect him as someone who walked the talk as well as talking the talk. His works published during his lifetime were few, but respected. This year marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of one of his best-known books, *Life Together*, which consolidates some of Bonhoeffer's earlier thinking on the topic of faith communities. It gives some of the details of his brief experiment in trying to live out these views of a community based on the Sermon on the Mount with a group of theological students at Finkenwalde Seminary.

While many Bonhoeffer scholars focus on the last two years of his life as the culmination of his thoughts on the church and world, I'm more fascinated by his early formation as a theologian and how he got to the point of this theological education experiment at Finkenwalde. So what I hope to do today is look at some of the ways of being in community set down by Bonhoeffer in the midst of Nazi Germany that have particular resonance for us today. I've asked some of our own doctoral students past and present to help me by reading quotations, written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer on this topic.

Before we get to Finkenwalde, however I want to trace some of the influences on Bonhoeffer's view of faith communities, particularly how children and youth shaped his viewpoint and also how his own choices to step beyond his white privileged background broadened his thoughts of what constituted community. Most of what we know from this period of Bonhoeffer's life is found in the extensive biography written by his former student, best friend, and family member by marriage, Eberhard Bethge<sup>1</sup>. He and his wife, Renate, Bonhoeffer's niece, have also been the curators of majority of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's papers that have led to the publication of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works volumes 1-17. Although Eberhard is no longer with us, I had the good fortune to spend some time with Renate Bethge

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of these basic biographical details come from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography*, by Eberhard Bethge, revised and edited by Victoria Barnett, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000 edition. I'll only note direct quotations from this text for the rest of this manuscript.

in 2005, as part of a Bonhoeffer study tour. Many of the pictures you'll see on the screen came from that experience.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born in 1906, grew up in a wealthy, educated white German family that took their civic responsibility seriously. On his father, Karl's side, he had many relatives who served in local or regional government positions. His grandmother, Julie Bonhoeffer, at age 91 protested the Nazi instituted boycott of Jewish businesses by crossing the line of stormtroopers to continue shopping at her preferred Jewish-owned store. On his mother, Paula von Hase's side were several relatives who held positions in the church hierarchy. For instance, his maternal grandfather, Karl Alfred von Hase was a professor of Practical Theology and baptized Dietrich and his twin sister, Sabine in 1909. Despite these influential church ancestors in his background, Bonhoeffer's family were not regular church goers at all. And so it came as quite a shock to the family when Dietrich at about age 12 announced that he was going to become a minister and theologian. His older siblings teased him about his choice, claiming that the church was "poor, feeble, boring, and petty." Dietrich's reply was that he would "reform it." His father, a noted psychology professor at the University of Berlin was especially unhappy about this choice of vocation, because he believed that his son was setting himself up for a sedentary life in some country parish, where he would be unconnected with the world at large. His father later admitted that he had been wrong in this regard.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer continued his theological studies in 1925, he was then required to do an internship in a church, much as our own contextual education requirements. So he began teaching Sunday School to children at age 19. He proved to be such a popular teacher that after that first year when the children graduated from his class, they begged him to continue teaching them. So he and his youngest sister, Susanne, began teaching a Thursday night class out of his home that included other neighborhood children including those from Jewish families. He sent out a curriculum that included (The Christians and their God, what God requires of us (including theological stances on politics, poverty, and sports), The Muslims and their God, The Catholic Church, and the arts in relation to faith.<sup>2</sup> —Not your standard children's curriculum... It is at this same time that he is working on his first dissertation, titled *Sanctorum Communio* where he talks about "Christ existing as Community<sup>3</sup>." Bonhoeffer writes about his memories of the community of these children when he arrives at his internship abroad in Barcelona in 1928 with these words,

What affected me most was bidding farewell to church work. On January 18, we Sunday-school helpers had our last meeting with the pastor...[He] mentioned my name in his general prayer. For some time the congregational prayer has often sent cold shivers down my spine but when the throng of children with whom I have spent two years prayed for me, the effect was incomparably greater.<sup>4</sup>

In Barcelona, Bonhoeffer makes one of his first choices in moving beyond his privilege as an upper class German male, when it comes to his housing for the year. He will be working with a German speaking Protestant Church in Barcelona and the church gives him two options for housing either stay with church members, who are also German speaking or rent a room from a Spanish speaking trio of ladies who run

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "Invitation to the Thursday Circle" in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 9, pages 524-525. Hereafter references from Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works series will be notated "DBW 9:524-525" in this case.

<sup>3</sup> DBW 1:121

<sup>4</sup> Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography, 94

a boarding house. Bonhoeffer chooses the Spanish speaking situation even though the women could not pronounce his first name and his Spanish was limited.<sup>5</sup> He felt it would give him practice in learning the language. Here in Barcelona, he starts a Sunday School from scratch, beginning with one girl the first Sunday and increasing to 30 students by visiting every family in the parish. It is while in Barcelona that Bonhoeffer contemplates the topic of his second thesis. He writes to a friend that he believes he'll address the problem that the child presents to theology and this is how *Act and Being* is born.<sup>6</sup> He contemplates the question is it more what we do or what we are that makes us of value to God and to the community?

In 1930, Bonhoeffer now heads to the United States to study at Union Seminary in New York for a year. Here he is faced with a choice of what faith community he will invest in during his time in America. He could go to the prestigious Riverside Church that sits near the seminary campus or he could attend the church of one of his classmates, Frank Fisher, who invites him to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem to hear the great Adam Clayton Powell Sr. preach. Some sources credit Powell with teaching the young Bonhoeffer how to love one's enemies, resist injustice, and recognize Christ's presence with the poor.<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer spends most of his Sundays in Harlem, becoming invested in the African American community, teaching Sunday School and participating in small group Bible studies. He marvels at the blending of head and heart in the worship services and views this vibrant community in action against the oppression that surrounds them. All of this contrasts with his German Lutheran upbringing and he starts a record collection of spirituals that he would continue to use in his teaching in an attempt to bring this same spirit to his German students and parishioners.

Although there are many other stories, that I could tell of the influences on Bonhoeffer's life of his encounters with others who helped him to see faith communities in new ways, I'd like to conclude this section of my talk with probably my favorite story of Bonhoeffer's early teaching— the unruly Confirmation class in Wedding, a working class neighborhood in Berlin. In 1931, Bonhoeffer is assigned to Zion Church in Wedding, where the parish pastor has asked for help, because a Confirmation group of 50 working class children has provoked his last nerve. Here is Bethge's account of Bonhoeffer's first encounter with this class.

The elderly minister and Bonhoeffer slowly walked up the stairs of the school building, which was several stories high. The children looked down on them from over the banisters, making an indescribable din and dropping things on the two men ascending the stairs. When they reached the top, the minister tried to force the throng back into the classroom by shouting and using physical force. He tried to announce that he had brought them a new minister who was going to teach them in the future and that his name was Bonhoeffer, and when they heard the name they started shouting "Bon! Bon! Bon!" louder and louder. The old man left the scene in despair, leaving Bonhoeffer standing silently against the wall with his hands in his pockets. Minutes passed. His failure to react made the noise gradually less enjoyable, and he began speaking quietly so that only the boys in the front row could catch a few words of what he said. Suddenly all were silent. Bonhoeffer merely remarked that they had put up a remarkable initial

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<sup>5</sup> "Spanish Diary, January-March 1928" DBW 10:60

<sup>6</sup> "Letter to Walter Dress, June 19, 1928" DBW 10:103

<sup>7</sup> "Adam Clayton Powell, Sr." Wikipedia entry lists three books that lift up this relationship between Bonhoeffer and Powell.

performance and went on to tell them a story about Harlem. If they listened, he told them, he would tell them more next time. Then he told them they could go. After that, he never had reason to complain about their lack of attentiveness.<sup>8</sup>

Bonhoeffer knew that if he was going to make any progress with these youth, he could not commute from his posh suburb of Grunewald, but actually needed to live where they lived. So he rents a room above a bakery, where any of the children were welcome at any time whether he was there or not. He crafted his catechism lessons around the questions that the class was asking rather than the standard catechism. Questions like—"why even go to church?" He and his mother made them all nice clothes for their Confirmation Day. He became part of the Body of Christ in Wedding instead of asking the youth to become like the Body of Christ in Grunewald.

Already we have heard how Bonhoeffer made choices that allowed him to step beyond the barriers of age, language, race, and class, in entering various faith communities. How do all these experiences and many more influence the way that Bonhoeffer conducts his own experiment in building a residential theological education community? In 1935, two years after Hitler's rise to power, he is given the directorship of the new Confessing Church seminary at Finkenwalde, then in Germany, now in Poland. Let's listen to some of the things that Bonhoeffer says about *Life Together* in this place. **[Quotation 1- originally read by DEdMin student, Khristy Bailey Ishmael]**

Christians belong not in the seclusion of a cloistered life, but in the midst of enemies. There they find their mission, their work...The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian living in the diaspora recognizes in the nearness of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. In their loneliness both the visitor and the one visited recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body. They receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord in reverence, humility, and joy...Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this and none that is less than this.<sup>9</sup>

Some of Bonhoeffer's detractors accused him of turning theological education into monastic education. After all he had this group of young men in a residential community in a remote location in northeastern Germany, but he makes it clear here at the beginning of *Life Together* that his view of Christian community is not set apart from the world, but deeply immersed in the muck of the time. He is setting up a community that is counter-cultural and will shortly also become illegal. What draws them together is a mutual faith in Jesus Christ, not any other shared characteristics. It is not a pious community set apart, but one that is wrestling with the problems of the day within a faith context. Bonhoeffer further makes the distinction of what type of community he is discussing, as he contrasts it with a more therapeutic or emotional view of community. **[Quotation 2- originally read by DEdMin graduates John Ryan and Angela Wyatt]**

V1: Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive.

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<sup>8</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography*, 226.

<sup>9</sup> DBW 5:Selected passages from 27-31

V2: Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest earnest and sacrificial.

V1: The basis of spiritual community is truth.

V2: The basis of emotional community is desire.

V1: In the one, all power, honor, and rule are surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

V2: In the other power and personal spheres of influence are sought and cultivated.

V1: Within the spiritual community there is never, in any way whatsoever, and “immediate” relationship of one to another.

V2: However, in the self-centered community there exists a profound, elemental emotional desire for community, for immediate contact with other human souls, just as in the flesh there is a yearning for immediate union with other flesh...Self-centered love loves the other for the sake of itself.

V1: Spiritual love loves the other for the sake of Christ.

V2: Emotional, self-centered love is at an end when it can no longer expect its desire to be fulfilled, namely in the face of an enemy. There it turns into hatred, contempt, and slander.

V1: Spiritual love, however, begins right at this point. It does not desire, but serves.

V2: Self-centered love constructs its own image of other persons, about what they are and what they should become. It takes the life of the other person in its own hands.

V1: Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person as seen from the perspective of Jesus Christ.

Both: The existence of any Christian communal life essentially depends on whether or not it succeeds at the right time in promoting the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God’s reality, between spiritual and emotional community.<sup>10</sup>

Now Bonhoeffer believed that most churches and other faith communities were sometimes both of these types of community at various points in their existence. He was especially worried about “church retreats” –sorry Joel—as places where the emotions would become so strong that they would chase away the hard work that is demanded from the spiritual form of community that Bonhoeffer was striving for. I think his cautions are worth noting for this community of Columbia Theological Seminary and others that strive for diversity. Spiritual community takes time and trust—trust in God and in each other. It is not something you can forge in a moment or in a tweet.

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<sup>10</sup> DBW 5:Selected passages from 36-45 scripted for two voices

Later in *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer uses the image of a chain to talk about the important role that the weaker members of any community play in the Body Christ. Here's what he says, **[Quotation 3-originally read by DEdMin student, Thang van Lian]**

The chain is unbreakable only when even the smallest link holds tightly with the others. A community, which permits within itself members who do nothing, will be destroyed by them. Thus, it is a good idea that all members receive a definite task to perform for the community so that they may Community must know that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of the community.<sup>11</sup>

"The elimination of the weak is the death of the community." Let's take just a moment to silently reflect on that quotation and its relevance for our own faith communities and for the world.

Most of what we have been looking at so far in *Life Together* is contained in the first chapter on community. In subsequent chapters, Bonhoeffer lays out some practices that he believes will promote this type of spiritual community. The first of these is communal worship. **[Quotation 4- originally read by DEdMin graduate Tammy Winchip]**

When a community living together includes children, it needs a different sort of daily worship than a community of seminarians. It is by no means healthy when one becomes like the other, when, for example, a brotherhood of seminarians is content with a form of family daily worship for children. However, the word of Scripture, the hymns of the church, and the prayer of the community should form a part of every daily worship that they share together.<sup>12</sup>

Scripture, songs of praise, and prayer constitute what Bonhoeffer believes that faith communities that live together should do every day. Students at Finkenwalde would have communal worship twice a day—in the morning and in evenings. Morning worship would occur before breakfast as the first act of the day—a practice embodied so beautifully by my Korean brothers and sisters in their early morning prayer services.

The Psalms were an important part of these services at Finkenwalde, as Bonhoeffer considered this book as the prayer book of the Bible. There was also a reading of one chapter of the Old Testament and ½ a chapter of the New Testament daily in lectio continuo fashion—going straight through the Bible. Some students complained that this was too much Scripture to take in daily, but Bonhoeffer wished for them to have a larger scope of the Bible. He would also use the daily readings from the Moravian Church for shorter verses of Scripture. This practice of sharing these daily readings would continue, even after Finkenwalde was closed, as Bonhoeffer continued his teaching through circular letters that went out to all his former students, many of whom were assigned as chaplains to the front in WWII and most of whom would not survive the war. If Bonhoeffer were alive today, he would certainly make use of the many ways of creating virtual community.

In worship, there would also be singing of hymns in these services and sometimes Bonhoeffer would play his record collection of spirituals. He thought that the singing of these songs of praise should be done in unison, so that the emphasis was on the unity of community rather than an artistic rendering of

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<sup>11</sup> DBW 5:96.

<sup>12</sup> DBW 5:52-53

a song. This is one place that I differ somewhat, as is evident from the Perfect Praise of the choir earlier. I see harmony as being the diversity within the unity of singing together, blending our various gifts.

The third part of any worship was prayer, in prayer Bonhoeffer talks about the importance of intercessory prayer in binding the community together. In my own worshipping community of Oakhurst Presbyterian, our prayers of the people are quite lengthy and are very concrete expressions of life together whether we're praying for illnesses, broken relationships, job loss, or the joys of a new baby, awards, or accomplishments. Bonhoeffer knew that these prayers bind a community together and help us to see another's perspective.

As important as communal worship is, Bonhoeffer also saw the need for personal time with God and urged the community to create space for this with these words. **[Quotation 5- originally read by DEdMin student Stefanie Taylor]**

Many persons seek community because they are afraid of loneliness. Those who take refuge in community while fleeing from themselves are misusing it to indulge in empty talk and distraction, no matter how spiritual this idle talk and distraction may appear. Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community. But the reverse is also true. Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone. Both belong together, Only in the community do we learn to be properly alone and only in being alone do we learn to live properly in the community.<sup>13</sup>

Bonhoeffer built in 30 minutes of meditation time to the daily routine of Finkenwalde, so that in this close knit community there would be time to be alone with their thoughts. Students were encouraged to read Scripture or pray for themselves or others. He knew that it was difficult to sustain one's attention for this length of time, so he encouraged community members to not feel guilty when their minds would wander to other subjects, but to allow their prayers to follow their wanderings, taking it as a sign that whoever or whatever was intruding on their time with God might need prayer in that moment. This time of silence was very difficult for the students initially, but they eventually grew into this daily practice.

Another thing that was difficult for students was following Bonhoeffer's one rule regarding community. Let's hear a little about this aspect. **[Quotation 5- originally read by DEdMin student, Leeanna Jackson]**

It is really important for a Christian community to know that somewhere in it there will certainly be an "argument among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest." It is the struggle of natural human beings for self-justification. They find it only by comparing themselves with others, by condemning and judging others. Self-justification and judging belong together in the same way that justification by grace and serving belong together. Thus it must be a decisive rule of all Christian community life that each individual is prohibited from talking about another Christian in secret.<sup>14</sup>

Bonhoeffer's one rule at Finkenwalde was embedded in the last sentence—"each individual is prohibited from talking about another in secret." Bonhoeffer knew that gossip is a stumbling block within any community. He also knew that it was unlikely that his students would be able to keep this

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<sup>13</sup> DBW 5: Selected passages from 81-83.

<sup>14</sup> DBW 5:94.

rule, so he added a proviso where if a student did talk about another behind their back, they needed to confess it to that individual and apologize. His former students, who survived the war often spoke about this rule and how they learned more from the many times they broke it rather than the few times when they remembered and kept it. I wonder how this rule translates to social media today where the gossip that was often secret is now on public display.

Bonhoeffer concludes his exploration of community in *Life Together* by looking at confession and forgiveness, as it leads us to the Lord's table. He has a more personal view of confession in mind than is currently practiced in many churches particularly within the Reformed tradition. **[Quotation 7- originally read by DEdMin graduate Sarah Erickson]**

Another Christian hears our confession of sin in Christ's place, forgives our sins in Christ's name. Another Christian keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to another believe to confess, I am going to God. Thus, the call within the Christian community to mutual confession and forgiveness goes out as a call to the great grace of God in the congregation. In confession there takes place a breakthrough to community. Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from the community. The more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them. Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of another Christian the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned.<sup>15</sup>

Individual confession? Is Bonhoeffer trying to Catholicize the German Lutheran Church? These were some of the questions asked by both the students and Confessing Church officials. For Bonhoeffer, individual confession was important, because it prevented all of them from hiding their sins, which can sometimes occur in a general communal confessional prayer. He allowed the students to pair off as they chose and he, himself, would ask different members of the community to hear his confession as a model for all. Bonhoeffer felt that in naming your sins out loud to another member of the community, you were also confessing them to God and to yourself. He also saw this as a necessary preparation in coming to the table as a trusting, unified and forgiven community ready to be nourished for the work ahead.

The Finkenwalde experiment lasted only two years. In autumn of 1937 the Gestapo closed down the seminary. Instead of forgetting about this brief experiment of intentional Christian community building, Bonhoeffer writes this book, *Life Together*, about it the following year, a book that continues to teach us things about living in community today 80 years later. Times have changed yet some of the same powers and issues from the time of WWII remain with us today. There is again a rise in fascism and treatment of others as less than fully human. There is again a time where some churches and communities are complicit with favoring the strong over the weak. We are also in a time where faith communities are searching for truth in the midst of many other competing messages. Here are three takeaways I see from Bonhoeffer's message:

1. Faith communities are not people set apart from the world, but people who are deeply immersed in the world, trying to make sense of it through engagement with Scripture and relationship to God and neighbor.
2. Faith communities are hard work. They are not something to take for granted, but need ongoing nurture and attention in the form of practices that we do together and alone. Listening is as important as talking as we strive to form authentic relationships with each other.

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<sup>15</sup> DBW 5:Selected passages from 109-110.

3. Faith communities need to pay attention to who is on the margins and find ways of encouraging individuals and groups to sacrifice their own privilege for the sake of others.

You may see other aspects of community in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words. The joy of reading *Life Together* is that each time I approach this 80-year-old text I see new things that both challenge and confirm my views of what it means to be people of faith as Christ in the world. I would encourage you over the course of this year, that if you try any of these things that you've heard about today or gleaned from your own reading of this classic text, that you hashtag any social media posts you may make with #CTSLifeTogether on whatever platform you frequently use, so that we can celebrate and hold each other accountable for a more robust and costly view of community.

Thank you again for attending and you truly are Christ existing as Community for me today.

Amen.

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