

*Life Together*, written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is a passionate call to Christian community. The book was based on his experience of leading a clandestine seminary that opposed the Nazis during WWII. It gives practical advice on how *life together* in Christ can be sustained in families and groups and churches. The book talks about very simple things like singing together, living together, praying together. The role of personal prayer, worship in our everyday lives, and Christian service is described in simple, yet profound words. I have always been intrigued by the idea that *life together* in the church is the very essence of the Christian faith. I believe that what we do here week by week is at the heart of God’s plan for the world.

At times theologians will refer to a fellow scholar who has a high regard for the person and work of Christ as one with a high Christology. That’s certainly my view, but I also suppose you could say I have a high ecclesiology, a high regard for the church. I happen to believe that Christ came to call and form the church. But I have learned that not everyone shares my view. Many people think of church as an optional aspect of the Christian life. I have known many people who felt their Christian life was just fine without the church. Like John...

It took six strong men to get John to church...in a casket. Although John was 68 years old, he was still running the family farm with 1,000 acres of Kansas wheat and soybeans. All of his family went to church. His son was a deacon; his wife sang in the choir, but John never came. He said that he had accepted Christ as his Savior when he was a kid. And if he knew one thing about the Bible, it was that you don’t have to go to church to be saved. Other people could go so they could earn a better reward in heaven, but he was satisfied. He wasn’t looking for stars in his crown. He just wanted to get there, and since he had that taken care of, he didn’t think he would bother with going to church.

Nancy couldn’t come to church because she loved her TV preacher. She fed on a steady diet of his Bible teaching. Over the years she had contributed thousands of dollars to his TV ministry. And she told me she would probably come to our church if we didn’t have worship the same time that his show was broadcast on Sunday morning. She knew all about her TV preacher, knew about his family, knew about his trips to the Holy Land and his Bible study cruises. But her TV preacher didn’t know her. He never visited her when she was admitted to the hospital. I did.

These were not two people totally devoid of faith, but they were guilty of a very low ecclesiology. Their stories can be repeated thousands of times by people who find all manner of excuses to avoid coming to church. I have never really understood what is so hard about coming to church. It doesn’t really take much of a Christian commitment to get up on Sunday morning and come sit in a pew for an hour. Some people seem to think it is the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest.

Personally I can’t imagine life without church. For me, church really is *life together*. And it is not just a matter of sharing time in the same building, but it is sharing life with other people who are fully aware that life is lived under the watchful care of God. In the church we get a God’s-eye-view of all of life. And that is the message that I get from this passage in James.

Much of what James has written in these verses has been misunderstood and misapplied. These verses have been used to support the doctrines of last rites and confession. Some people think James is endorsing special healing methods. Some will even refuse medical treatment, believing it to be a violation of this passage. But I believe this passage is about life together in a typical local church. It's about praying, sickness, sin, and confession.

*“Is anyone among you sick?”* James asks. Then he responds, *“Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.”* That does not mean there is a hierarchy of righteousness, as if the prayers of a pastor or an elder are more powerful or effective than anybody else. No. James is advocating the most normal thing in the world for those in the church. We must simply reach out, asking others to care for us. And we put their names on the prayer list. It is what normally happens when we live in community. It is that sense of community that makes life different for a Christian.

James says, *“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”* (5:16). And he ends by saying, *“My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins”* (5:19-20).

Fred Craddock said about this passage, “Everyday needs are addressed in this text. It pictures a community in which people suffer and pray, rejoice and sing, become sick and get well, sin and are forgiven. This picture reflects congregational life as we know it. People looking to the community of faith for help. And the church offers help in ways that are genuinely appropriate and effective” (*Preaching Through the Christian Year B*, p. 424).

In her bestselling book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott explains why she makes her son go with her to church. She says, “The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith... people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful... Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.”

Then she says, “When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on.” (*Traveling Mercies*, p. 100).

I like Anne Lamont's description of church. This really is the place where you can find people who are practicing a deep sense of spirituality. Here are people who are sharing their lives together with purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, and joy. Church is the place where people practice their faith, however imperfectly. We often get to the end of our rope, but I would hope that our church helps people to tie a knot and hold on.

James pictures the church as the place where prayer and singing go hand in hand, praise and difficulty. Verse 13 says, “*Is any among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.*” It’s a place where people confess their sins to one another and are restored, where people visit the sick and pray for them, where people are cheerful and sing for joy.

On any given Sunday this room contains people who are close to giving birth and those who are nearer to dying. On one side is a young woman, newly engaged, who anticipates that marriage will be heavenly. There is a young man who is not sure he believes in God anymore. Over there is someone preparing for ministry. Here is a woman who fears for her life after her recent diagnosis of cancer. And here is one celebrating her fourth year as a breast cancer survivor. There’s a man who just lost his job, one who just landed the contract that will secure his future, and a two-year-old so surrounded by love and attention that she thinks all the world is her stage. Life together in the church is a mixture of people at every stage of life. Take any one of these people apart from the community of faith and their life would be so much less, our lives would be so much less. One of the secrets of church is that it is lived in community.

I couldn’t help but notice that Anne Lamont called hers a “funky little church.” Every church is a bit funky with its own quirks and oddities. There is no such thing as a perfect church because every church is made up of imperfect people. But these are imperfect people who are at least trying to be more Christ-like. Real Christianity is learning that true faith is to be found in just such a funky little church. Every New Testament church was a little funky, just like churches today. But it was those funky New Testament churches that birthed the Gospel and passed it on for all the generations to come. Somehow God chooses to use imperfect people and imperfect churches to accomplish his purposes.

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown has said, “I believe that we are placed here to be companions—a wonderful word that comes from *cum panis* (with bread). We are here to share bread with one another so that everyone has enough.” As we become companions, awareness grows that such companionship deserves to be extended. Our bread—and our faith—is to be shared. There is something about sharing our bread, sharing our faith, sharing our lives together in the Church of Jesus Christ that makes life right. This rightness is a home for the heart. It’s the essence of *living by faith*.

Anne Lamott relates another story told by her pastor. When the pastor was seven years old, she had a best friend who got lost one day. “The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”

Then Anne Lamott concludes with these words, “And that is why I have stayed so close to (my church)—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their voices, I can always find my way home” (*Traveling Mercies*, p. 55).

God bless this simple witness to his Word. Amen.