

WE, NOT JUST ME*by Elaine Poproski*

In Acts 2, we're offered a picture of the early church. It's a description of the way the earliest Christians gathered and how they were with each other. This is how it reads, beginning at verse 42:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What a beautiful picture of the church. We see it again a couple chapters later, beginning in Acts 4:32, where we read this summary statement:

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Such a beautiful picture!

No one among them has any need because any time a need was made known, those who had something to give, gave it. They sold what they could so they could share the proceeds. They were together every day. They connected in the Temple courts. They ate together. They prayed together. They were devoted to learning all they could about Jesus and about being Jesus' followers. They weren't just talking the talk; they were walking the walk.

It wasn't a particularly unique vision of community they were living, at least not as a theory. Everything we know about the Jewish sect that had settled near Qumran somewhere around 150 years before Jesus suggests that they sought to live this way. The idea of sharing everything was also a Greek ideal since at least 350 years before Jesus, when the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, defined true friends as those who hold everything in common and are of one mind about things.¹ It was a utopian vision of community. It was the living portrait of God's Kingdom as painted by Jesus. And somehow these earliest Christians managed to live it in real life. For awhile, at least.

Sadly, we know from all the letters in the New Testament that as time went on this idealized, utopian-esque way of being fell apart. In Corinth they didn't share with each other anymore. They didn't even eat together. Everyone just ate what they brought when they got there. And they didn't all get there at the same time because some people had to work later than others. In more than one church there was significant conflict between the Jewish and the non-Jewish Christians. They'd lost what it was to be one in heart and mind. The churches in the Galatian

region were listening to other teachers and were no longer devoted to the apostles' teaching. The list goes on and on. As gatherings of Christians became more settled, as the expectation of Jesus' immediate return began to fade, as their very human weaknesses and character flaws started dulling the vision of the Holy Spirit, this utopian ideal of community began to retreat from reality, back into the world of dreamers. The reality that while God's kingdom had come in Jesus, it was still yet to come in full, was on display for all to see in these flawed churches full of flawed people.

None of the letters written to the churches in the New Testament promise a return to the Acts 2 church. And I think, perhaps, that's a good thing. Utopian visions can inspire us, but they can also make us bitter and angry when they aren't realized. When the bar is set so high that we can't get there, we give up, we walk away, we forget about it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a pastor and a theologian... he has a little book on community called *Life Together*. It was originally published in 1938. World War II was going on, he was a German pastor living and preaching and teaching against the Nazi regime in Germany. He pointed out that sometimes, when we're inspired by a vision like that that's presented in the Acts 2 church, we might find ourselves loving the vision – loving the dream – more than the actual, real life community of people around us. Our vision of community actually becomes an idol that replaces God. He wrote this:

“Heⁱⁱ who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial... He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That's the crux of it right there. “He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community.” He acts as if real community – kingdom-of-God-reflecting community, Acts 2 community – is something we can create. If we just do this or that, if we just put the right rules in place and make people follow them, if we just try really, really hard, we can do it. We can reproduce the kind of community that was the Acts 2 church. Except we can't. Our own sinfulness will get in the way every time. 2000 years of Christian history attests to this truth. Flawed people cannot create flawless community.

Isn't it a good thing God isn't asking us to create this kind of community?

Don't get me wrong, everything Jesus taught – the entirety of Scripture, really – testifies to the truth that the Acts 2 picture of community – of the church – is God's picture – is God's vision of the church. That picture of people devoted to growing more like Christ together, to praying with and for each other, to sharing what they have so that it can be said that there is no needy person among them, to being completely united in heart and mind – that picture is the picture of God's kingdom attested to by Scripture. And it's absolutely what Jesus' followers are called to announce as having come in Jesus and to live into as if it has already fully arrived.

But it is not something we create. In Bonhoeffer's words: “the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace.”^{iv} This is what we read in Ephesians 2, where the author is reminding the non-

Jewish Christians that once upon a time they'd been without Christ – without hope. We read this, beginning at verse 13 of Ephesians 2:

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity.”

That new humanity is the church. It is community as seen briefly in the Acts 2 Christians. It's only made possible by the grace of God through Jesus' death and resurrection. It's the mysterious, miraculous transformation that begins the moment we start to allow God's Holy Spirit to come into our lives and begin making us more like Jesus. It's what moves us beyond simply doing life together to actually being the church. Jesus created in himself, one new humanity. We are that new humanity. We, together in community, united by our common faith in Jesus, united by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, united by our adoption into God's family... We are the new humanity Christ created in himself. We who are the church – Jesus' followers – are the new humanity created in and by Christ.

But what does it mean to be the new humanity? What does it mean, practically?

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun I've recently come to appreciate, wrote about community from the perspective of someone committed to living in a monastic community. Hers is not our experience, but I think her insights into community – what it is and what it requires in particular – is helpful for us as we think about what it means to be the church – to be the new humanity created by Christ. This is a bit of what she wrote:

“Simply living with people does not by itself create community. People live together in armies and prisons and college dormitories and hospitals, but they are not communities unless they live out of the same reservoir of values and the same centre of love... We have to share a common vision. We have to want good for one another. We have to be able to draw from the same well together.”^v

That well is Jesus. Without him, we cannot make the transition from simply living together – or doing church together – to truly being a community – to being the new humanity – to being the church. But with Jesus – in Jesus – the miracle of community is possible – the gift of true community, what Bonhoeffer calls true fellowship, can be ours.

One of the richest metaphors for the church, in the New Testament, is that of a body. Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans. It's in chapter 12 of that letter, beginning at verse 1.

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to

the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Let's go back to the first verse. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

The thing I want to point out here is that while these words were meant for individual Christians, which is the way we tend to read them... We live in a highly individualized context where we tend to read everything as about *me*. However, Paul was writing to churches; he wasn't just writing for the individuals, he was writing to the churches. People gathered in smaller groups – however many you could fit into somebody's home – all throughout Rome. Paul was writing to these churches, so when he writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice," he's not just talking about the physical bodies of individual people; he's talking about the corporate bodies that are the churches. He's saying, "Present your church / your gathering / your group as a living sacrifice. He's writing about something so much bigger, so much more all-encompassing than simple instructions to Christians individually. He's writing about the church – the new humanity. And he's saying that if we're going to be this new humanity created in Christ, we must respond to this appeal to sacrifice, not some object or symbol, but our very selves and in that, our church.

What does that mean – what does it look like – to present our church as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God?

The answer begins in verse 2. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Don't be like every other so-called community or corporate body in the world around you. Be something different. Be something holy and acceptable to God. Be something good – not like people are sometimes good, but like God is good – like Jesus, who allowed himself to be crucified and killed so we could be freed from sin and death, is good. Allow your minds to be transformed. Allow your thinking to be transformed. The Greek word Paul uses here is metamorphosis – like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. We can't do the transforming ourselves, the verb is passive, we are transformed by God – by the Holy Spirit. That's what happens when we present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. What happens when we lay ourselves on the altar to God is a metamorphosis – a transformation. We are turned into that new humanity.

There's a reason God wants us to be transformed. As we are, without the surrender – the sacrifice of our selves that he invites – we might think we know what is good and acceptable and perfect. Let's be honest, a lot of people in our world are convinced they know exactly what it means to be good, to be acceptable, to be perfect. There are all sorts of people who claim to know the mind and the will of God. But unless we've laid ourselves down on God's altar and allowed God to do the work of shaping us to be more like Jesus – of transforming us – we cannot truly understand. That's because God is the one who defines his terms. God wants us to know his

will, but we can only truly know his will if we first allow him to transform us by renewing our minds – our minds individually, but also our corporate mind as the church – the new humanity.

But again, let's not forget that Paul wasn't writing to a bunch of disparate individuals. He was writing to churches. And so just as the invitation is for churches to present ourselves to God as a sacrifice, so is the plea for churches – for Walmer – to not be conformed to the world around us but to be transformed by God so that we will know God's will – how God defines what is good and acceptable and perfect. To be the new humanity that is created in Christ, we sacrifice ourselves – we give ourselves completely to God, who then transforms us by renewing our minds in such a way that we can truly discern his will – know what is good and acceptable and perfect.

As we move to verse 3, this whole transforming of the mind idea continues. Paul unpacks what it means – what it looks like. This is what he writes in verse 3: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

In other words, in addition to discerning God's will, the transformation he longs to do in us will enable us to understand our place in what he's doing. None of us, alone, are the new humanity. None of us, alone, are the church. He's not encouraging a kind of false humility here, where we say to each other, “Oh no, I'm not that important here; you could easily do without me.” In fact, he's saying the opposite. This is what he writes, beginning in verse 4: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

What we do differs. Who we are differs. How we do what we do differs, but all of us are necessary. In 1 Corinthians 12, beginning at verse 14 we read this:

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be?

This is the new humanity: a body that consists of all sorts of different people – different parts as it were – that are all essential. This is the body that Paul pleads for us to sacrifice so that God can transform us by the renewing of our minds, so that we can discern his will.

Here's the question we're left with this week: If we are all part of the body, what part am I? What is it that I bring to the body? Why am I important to the body's ability to discern God's will and go about the business of God's mission in the world?

If the church – the new humanity... If Walmer is to be joining God in his mission out in the world, in his mission of bringing his kingdom fully here in the here-and-now, where do I fit in that?

Each of us do fit. We're not more important than others. Neither are we less important to that creation of this body – this new humanity in Christ. Not a single one of us is a spare part. Not a single one of us is unimportant to Walmer being the church. We're in this together – knit together by God just like a body is knit together in the womb by God.

What part of the body are you?

What do you bring – what gifts, experience, talent, resources, view of the world do you bring?

Why are you important to the Walmer's ability to discern God's will and go about the business of God's mission in the world?

ⁱ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 205.

ⁱⁱ Bonhoeffer was writing in a time before inclusive language was a thing. When he uses male language here, he's referring to everyone, not just men.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. (New York: HarperOne, 1954), 27-28.

^{iv} Ibid, 20.

^v Joan Chittister. *Wisdom distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 44.