

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
New Member Sunday
17 February 2019

“Life Together”

Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 133:1



The context of this Sunday’s worship service accepting new members to our church on the tails of last week’s finance meeting require me to share with you a funny little story.

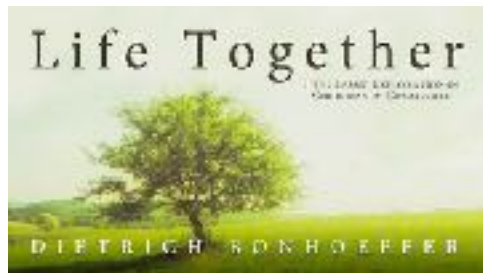


A pastor once announced, “There will be a meeting of the Church Board immediately after the service”. After the close of the service, the Church Board gathered at the back of the sanctuary for the announced meeting. But there was a stranger in their midst – a visitor who had never attended their church before. “My friend,” said the

pastor, “Didn’t you understand that this is a meeting of the Board?”
“Yes,” said the visitor, “and after today’s sermon, I suppose I’m just about as bored as anyone else who came to this meeting”.

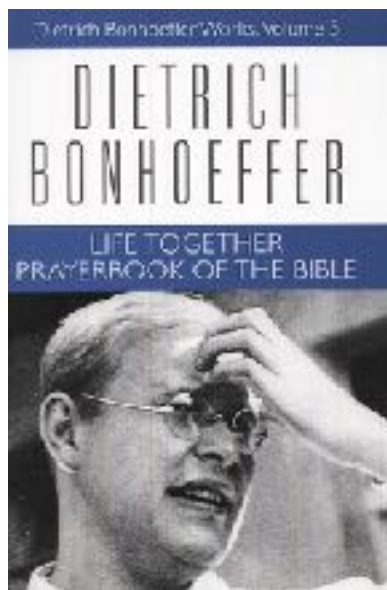


I would like to thank all of our new members for joining our church despite perhaps being bored by my message last week - I believe everyone joining our church was here last week.



The fact that our new members desire to join our faith community is a testimony to the value they place on what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called ‘life together’. *Life Together* is the title of Bonhoeffer’s book that he wrote to emphasize the importance of Christian fellowship and solidarity. Bonhoeffer is someone who would know how precious

Christian fellowship and solidarity is because he was a leader of Christian communities and he depended upon them. Bonhoeffer was severed from his faith communities when incarcerated in prison by the Nazi regime and he created and led them even while awaiting his execution in the closing days of World War II.



I first read Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* in divinity school at the University of Chicago and it has inspired me as a local pastor ever since. In preparation for this Sunday's service, I re-read much of it during my short trip to Florida. Parts of text almost bring me to tears.



I won't summarize the whole book for you. But, I will share with you what I understand to be the introductory premise and that is, 'Do not take *this* [gesturing toward those gathered in the sanctuary] for granted'.



Do not take *this* for granted. Bonhoeffer wrote, "It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden underfoot by those who have the gift every day". So, we are warned, do not see *this*, our being together, as routine or ordinary. Do not see *this* as mundane or unexceptional at all. Bonhoeffer says that *this* is beautiful, *this* is precious, *this* is to be treasured, *this* is to be deeply valued, *this* is to be seen as sacred.



Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in the world to share God’s Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing”.



Bonhoeffer reminded us that those in prison cannot attend their houses of worship. Bonhoeffer reminded us that even in the midst of our faith community, there are those who are sick in hospital that cannot be here. As you well know, there are loved ones in nursing homes or confined to their homes who would love to be where we are. Even as I wrote this sermon, trapped in an airport, I was *not* desperate to return to work; I was desperate to be in worship and fellowship with

you here, now, in this place. As a missionary, I know there are those who serve our faith while sometimes alone in lands where it cannot be celebrated openly or freely - or at all. Bonhoeffer reminded us, ‘Do not take *this* for granted’.

Bonhoeffer reminded us that “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer”.



This joy is yearned for my John, the disciple of Jesus exiled on the island of Patmos;



it is yearned for by the apostle Paul while he was imprisoned.



And Jesus, though not a Christian, lived in the midst of his enemies. In the end, his disciples deserted him; and on the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evil doers and mockers.



So, friends in Christ, let us not take one another for granted. Let us recognize each other and our worship and fellowship together as wonderful and beautiful. And let us acknowledge, recognize, appreciate, cherish and love our new members - not for a moment taking them for granted. Let us embrace them. And thank them. And celebrate their presence with us this day.

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, the people of God responded, “Amen!”