

2023 LENTEN STUDY

with Bishop Ken Carter

Lenten Reflection
Bishop Ken Carter
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What do you do when your community fails you? We have the treasure of the gospel, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4, in earthen vessels. In his lifetime Dietrich Bonhoeffer witnessed his church's complicity with a powerful movement of white supremacy in Germany. This movement would execute the genocide of a people and disrupt the peace of the world. And in the process, the experience of community—in families, in churches, in neighborhoods, in nations—was shattered.

What do you do when your community fails you? One of the gifts of Bonhoeffer's Life Together is his reckoning with disillusionment. Each of us, he writes, has a wishful image for the community that we seek. And our image is shattered by the failure of community.

The community will always fail us.

This turns out to have a meaning that we had not anticipated. "A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and if we are fortunate, with ourselves is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an experience of genuine Christian community. By sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world..."

The grace of God is in the truth that community is possible only through Jesus Christ. The reality of this community is already present—we do not have to wish for it. It is a spiritual and not an emotional reality. Community is not the way in which others meet our needs. Community is our discovery of a way to love the other for the sake of Christ.



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In community we see others only through the mediating presence of Jesus Christ. We cannot see them apart from him. In the community we are accountable to Jesus Christ, and so is our sister, our brother, our sibling. And so we cannot “coerce, control or dominate” others even if we believe we are being motivated by love.


Our Christian communities fail us when we place definitions on them that we were never called to make. The person, presence and power of Christ is at the heart of community, but we want to add something: perhaps my opinion, or my politics, or my need, or my natural desire. This has been the failure of the attractional church. We invite others to join us for one stated reason; over time we change the stated purpose of who we are. This is one of the reasons many are attracted to the church and are later disillusioned by that same church.

In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ is the true foundation of our community. We see him most clearly as we hear the word, which is his call to us. And, Bonhoeffer insists, we can only experience community as see each other in and through Christ. To see each other in this way will lead to a fundamental change and to a love that spiritual, one “that will thus speak to Christ about the other Christian more than to the other Christian about Christ.”

In other words, more intercession, less judgment.

When our communities fail us, when other people fail us, we pray to Christ for them. Finally, we are all beneficiaries of a vast forgiveness.

In this way a life together becomes possible.



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Questions: Where have I sensed the greatest disappointment with my community or my church? How can I begin to come to a person who has failed me in prayer, and to release them to Christ? How can our disillusionment and failure be a pathway for God's grace?

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