



# 2023 LENTEN STUDY

with Bishop Ken Carter

**Lenten Reflection**  
**Bishop Ken Carter**  
**March 29, 2023**

"It is good and pleasant when kindred dwell together in unity", the Psalmist wrote (133.1). With these words Dietrich Bonhoeffer began his spiritual classic, *Life Together*. Of course, he lived and ministered in a deeply divided and violent time. White supremacy, in the form of the Nazi oppression, was expressed in both a genocide and a fracturing in the church.

We too live in a deeply divided and violent time. As I wrote these words this week, I learned of the deaths of six at a church-related school in Tennessee. Some call for prayer. Others call for prayer and more sane gun laws, or even the cessation of the manufacture of assault weapons.

The "together" part of the psalm and the book's title may be our greatest challenge. The enduring life of Bonhoeffer's book, written for the students at a small seminary of the Confessing Church almost 90 years ago, attests to our desire to be together, and our need for mature, biblical guidance in our search for community.

Bonhoeffer offers two substantive chapters on the spiritual life, one on "the day together" and one on "the day alone". Discipleship in the way of Jesus involves being a part of his body, the church, and yet at the same time finding solitude and quietness. Both are shaped by the disciplines of listening to scripture and listening to God in prayer.



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Then Bonhoeffer turns to a profound chapter on “service”. Here he focuses most directly on the obstacles and possibilities of a life together. He recalls that there were arguments among the first disciples (Luke 9), over who would be the greatest. He comments, “No sooner are people together than they begin to observe, judge and classify each other.” We do this in order to gain a competitive position, and this is “the struggle of natural human beings for self-justification.”

Self-justification leads to judgment. The opposite is justification by grace, which leads to service.

Our temptations toward self-justification and judgment are rooted in our desire to control the other person. Bonhoeffer reminds us that we are not their creator (!), and that they exist to show us “the richness of God’s glory shining over (our) brothers and sisters”. Bonhoeffer is insistent: “God did not make others as I would have made them. God did not give them to me so that I could dominate and control them, but so that I might find the Creator by means of them”.

In our language, we would say that diversity in the community, in Christ’s body, is a gift. Our desire for a controlled uniformity does violence. And it ignores the reality that each person is created not in our image, but in God’s own image (Genesis 1).

This is what it means to live in grace, which is our only way of being justified before God. That humility leads us to replace judgment with service. And we serve in three particular ways.

- + We listen to each other.
- + We perform even the smallest and most mundane helpful acts for each other.
- + And we bear with each other.



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The bearing with each other, Bonhoeffer writes, is aligned with Jesus' death on the cross for us, and his understanding of the prophecy of Isaiah: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53), a passage often read in our churches on Good Friday.

A closing personal word: Bonhoeffer concludes the chapter with a reference to bishops. Bishops are not persons who have extraordinary gifts or distinguished qualities. To think in this way, Bonhoeffer writes, is to "poison" the community. The bishop is to serve the community according to the word of Jesus, and in light of the needs of the community.

This has been a helpful reminder to me. We are in a season when churches and communities are divided. We are in a time when mature spiritual leaders, laity and clergy, are called to go more deeply to the well of a spiritual classic, such as Life Together, which itself points us to the life-giving wisdom of the Holy Bible. If I am helpful as your Bishop in this complicated season, it is no more and no less than this: to live in community with you, through the grace of Jesus Christ, which is my only justification, and to serve you.

**Questions: In a practical way, how can you move from judgment to service today? How can you listen more closely to your sister, brother or sibling? And when did you experience the gift of someone recently listening to you?**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, pages 69-71