

LIFE IN COMMUNITY: A GOSPEL WITNESS

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This paper was created for Caring Conversations 6 hosted by the Kitchener/Waterloo Conference on April 16, 2005, at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Kitchener. Other related papers are available at www.telc.ca (look for "Caring Conversations") and at www.elcic.ca (look for "blessings").

I. What we fail to see

When we consider the topic of life in community there is a great deal that we see easily in the pages of the New Testament. For example, we see the vital image of the gathered community as the continuing incarnation, the body of Christ (esp. Rom 12:4 ff; 1 Cor 12:12-27). We see the promise of Christ's presence whenever even the smallest of groups gather for the sake of remembering and discerning him (Matt 18:18-20). We see Paul's tender exhortations to live in unity with one another and to be of one mind (e.g., Phil 1:27-2:8). We have no trouble seeing these soaring visions and quiet promises of the goodness that is possible in community. We have no trouble seeing the *ideas* that are part of the gospel. However, we have a much harder time understanding that the gospel is also an intractably lived and embodied reality, not just a set of ideas. We have a harder time seeing the groups of people, their struggles, and the cultural background that makes the ideas so remarkable.

Part of what we do not see is how hard it was for those first communities to imagine and live themselves into these ideals of community. Much of the work of the past decades of biblical scholarship has been invested in creating a stronger, clearer picture of the communities for which the books of the NT were first written. For example, the four Gospels are now understood to have been written—not as history books for whatever audience might want to purchase them at the local bookstore—but to four very different communities each with its own set of circumstances.¹ Early Christian communities were wise enough to canonize these four very different accounts, understanding in some way that one story would not be enough, canonizing diversity. In the same way, for generations, readers thought of Paul primarily as a systematic theologian and, only more recently have begun to see what was there all along—the fact that he was always writing to diverse, specific situations and communities and not writing to a generalized and universal audience.²

We do not see all the day-to-day investments that people had in marking separation and difference. We cannot, on the basis of just the words in the NT texts see the ways in which difference and discrimination were a part of people's bodily experience, visceral reactions, what should be taken for granted. Since we are partly shaped by the NT what we don't see is how counter-cultural some of their notions and practices of community were.

II. The disturbing mix that was Christianity

One of the most moving statements about the good news of community is the claim in Galatians

3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul says something quite similar in 1 Cor 12:12-13 (“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” See also Rom 10:12; Col 3:11.) In both cases Paul claims that some of the most powerful and significant divisions between people no longer exist because of the greater reality of an experience of union in Christ.

This short statement carries far more weight than its brief form might suggest. For one thing, it seems to have had strong associations with baptismal theology. Many people argue that it was part of one of the earliest baptismal liturgies practised by the early church.³ In any case, Paul certainly associates these ideas with baptism in both Gal and 1 Cor. That connection suggests that these ideas were of central importance to Christian identity from the earliest of moments and that the very act of being initiated into life of community is marked by the dissolution of boundaries and difference. This statement is also of particular significance in the context of our topic for today. For one thing, many people have compared the initial full inclusion of Gentiles to current questions with the full welcome and equal participation of homosexual Christians in the community of faith. But even more to the point for my subsequent comments, this statement is a powerful example to illustrate the enormous world of cultural values against which the first Christians understood their own identity. In other words, this short statement illustrates that the gospel witness is not just a matter of ideas, but also experiences of social structure, of human bodies, and of emotions.

Neither Jew nor Greek

Across cultures and times two categories of daily life are routinely used to mark the difference between groups: food and sex. More than any other factors food taboos and sexual taboos are universal triggers for disgust, but not every group is disgusted by the same foods or sexual practices. Therefore, in many societies customs of dating and diet, food and fornication, are potent ways to distinguish "us" from "them." So, when Paul claims that there is no difference between Jew and Greek or "Hellenist" he is expecting the people of Galatia to overlook a couple of glaring details to the contrary. For between Jews and Greeks were the significant and unsettling distinctions of kosher, or *kashrut* regulations, and circumcision--issues of food and sex. It is perhaps hard for 21st century Canadians to conceive of how disgusting one cultural group could be to another, but the power of these distinctions is emphasised over and over again in Paul's letters, especially this same letter to the Galatians. In chapter 2 Paul tells of a time in Antioch when Peter, chief among the disciples, actually withdraws from table fellowship with Greek Christians because of the strong and persistent sense that differences about food really do matter. For Paul the very "truth of the gospel" (2:14) is at stake in this conflict. If the Christians whether Jewish or Greek cannot set aside this difference for the sake of their communion at table, then the gospel itself is lost.

However, while in Antioch Paul advocated an expanded menu, in Corinth he urges the opposite. Among the Corinthians Christians there were those who were troubled by the fact that other members of the assemblies were eating meat that had been part of pagan rites. In this case Paul suggests a tempering of freedom for the sake of the other. So, for Paul it is not the food practices themselves that matter; rather it is the effect of dining habits on the character of community.

Whatever kind of eating erases the difference between members is the right kind of eating. Whatever food we can share is blessed. In each case Paul urges his audiences to think of the other and to act in such a way that more room will be made for them, even when it requires change on our part. No one is required by Paul either to eat or to refrain from eating anything. But they are required to think of the effects of their eating on the other members of the assembly.

Neither slave nor free

The case of slavery provides another example of a deeply embedded set of social differences. The distinction between slaves and free people was essential to the functioning of ancient Rome. Unlike any subsequent slave culture, the Roman empire depended on slavery for its entire economic structure. Thus, a world without slaves was simply unimaginable.⁴ Therefore, it is not surprising that ancient philosophers like Aristotle thought that slavery was an ontological category; in other words, some people must have been born to be slaves. Routinely, masters were described as spiritual and slaves were described as mere bodies. In fact, the word body (soma) regularly served as a synonym for slave. In wills, contracts, and other forms of financial accounts slaves were listed along with other possessions as a certain number of "bodies." Furthermore, sometimes slaves were even compelled literally to fill in for their masters' bodies. On occasion they were made to receive the corporal punishments to which their owners had been sentenced. In one case a Christian woman is praised for sparing herself the requirement of sex with her husband by secretly sending her female slave to him as her sexual body double.⁵ Such acts of injustice and dehumanisation were possible because in the ancient world there were thought to be real differences between slave and free. You cannot treat someone this way unless you think they are not as fully human as you are.

Neither male nor female

Perhaps the strongest of all the distinctions marked in this saying is the contrast between male and female. Among both philosophers and physicians of the time the difference between men and women was fundamental and immutable; in fact, it was part of the very structure of their bodies. Women were made of different flesh than men. They were more porous, and held greater moisture than did men. As a result of these assumptions, women were also considered morally weaker and more susceptible to corruption than men were. Just as more water could enter a woman, so too could evil spirits or false ideas find easy access through her permeable flesh. In fact virtually every character flaw to which a person might be vulnerable was described as a feminine characteristic. At all costs a wise young man should avoid becoming womanly since it would lead to every imaginable loss of control whether sexual, intellectual, or even—believe it or not—violent.⁶ It is not surprising, then, that women also sometimes appear in the art of the time as representatives of whole groups of subordinated or reviled people. When monuments were erected to honour generals or emperors for their success in military campaigns they are frequently shown looming, weapon in hand, over the figure of a woman who personifies whatever unfortunate group happened to lose the war. In this world view women were the ideal representatives of the weak enemy. The ideas about differences between men and women were so prevalent that such images needed no explanation and seem to have caused no moral outrage either.

Given this background we have a greater sense of just how startling some of the gospel witness was. When the early Christian community repeated the belief that "all are one in Christ Jesus," they

were claiming a unity that contradicted standard boundaries of culture, economy, and even human bodies. To their peers there was nothing natural in their assertion; rather they were staking their identity as Christians against some powerful social codes. For that reason, this baptismal claim probably did not seem like good news to many people in the ancient world, but if you were a woman, a slave, or a Gentile, in short if you were one of the excluded, here was gospel indeed.

III. The limits of community

Given the deep and significant counter-cultural character of these claims about community, it is not surprising to discover that the NT also witnesses to times when living into this ideal seemed quite difficult for some early Christian assemblies. We get a sense of these difficulties in chapter 18 of Matthew. This chapter is often considered the section on Church order and organisation in this Gospel because in this section the evangelist has collected many of the teachings of Jesus and early traditions that describe communal interrelationships.⁷ Furthermore, the material he includes here, and the way he has organized it, give several indications that life in community is no easy matter for this group. The chapter begins with a cluster of teachings about power struggles and the loss of members. These include: the admonition that we should seek low status (like that of children in the ancient world) if we want to learn kingdom greatness (18:1-5); the caution that our concern should be primarily for those who are least powerful in one way or another (vv.6-9); and the parable of the sheep that strays from the fold (vv. 10-14).⁸ The chapter ends with two units that call for expansive and grace-filled practices of forgiveness beyond counting (Peter's question in vv. 21-22) and with a deep awareness of how much we ourselves have been forgiven (the parable of the unforgiving servant in vv. 23-35).

In between these clusters we find a section of teaching that only Matthew remembers and it is this teaching alone that seems to suggest that there might be limits to the challenges that a community can endure. I am speaking of the instructions about what to do when another member of the community wrongs, or "sins against," you: "If your brother or sister sins against you go and bring it to light between you and him/her alone..." (18:15-20). A number of details are noteworthy in this teaching. First, the passage advises *multiple* attempts to reconcile through conversation and listening. Second, it creates a communal context for such matters by recognising that other members of the assembly might assist in reconciliation. Third, the "sins" discussed here are not best described as individual moral faults, but as relational in character. In this passage, sin is assumed to be a wrong that one person commits against another, not the breach of a code for personal comportment.

Finally, after repeated attempts to restore relationship using all the resources of the community, the instructions do seem to allow the possibility that such reconciliation might sometimes prove impossible. Then, the one who has been wronged is advised to treat the unrepentant sister or brother "as a Gentile and a tax collector." It would seem, based on these words, that there is a limit to what community can endure. The implication of the comparison with Gentiles and tax collectors is that the unrepentant are to be thought of as outsiders, as people who are no longer "like us." It would seem that under the circumstances of a broken relationship in which one person has harmed another and refuses repeated appeals to make amends then communal ties are finally broken. In the history of interpretation this text has often been taken as a call for excommunication or shunning of one kind or another. Apparently there are limits to the strain that the fabric of community can bear.

In particular, the inability of one member to reconcile with another seems to be one of those strains and sometimes relief comes only when that member leaves.

Is that the last word on the matter; are such people forever lost to us? That would seem to be the meaning of this text and, as I mentioned, the church has often interpreted it this way through history. Yet, when one considers Jesus' treatment of tax collectors and Gentiles such a conclusion hardly seems inevitable. Even the Gospel of Matthew remembers that tax collectors are among the people with whom Jesus was known to share table, despite public disapproval (Matt 9:10-13; 11:19), and also among those whom he called as disciples (10:3). So, even at this point in the process there exists the possibility of grace: although the assembly may be strained to its limits, relationship is not impossible. Could it be that when communal life fails we are invited to start again with one another, sharing a smaller table, learning to know who the other is with mercy as our measuring stick (9:13a)? Here the gospel witnesses to a powerful call to seek relationship even outside the bounds of the fuller community. Here are hints of pathways that are mainly unmarked and unexplored by most of us.

IV. A Gospel witness

These texts then witness to the early Christian ideal of a new community established by Christ and maintained by following his pattern of seeking reconciliation even beyond the limits of what the community could bear. For the first generations of Christians the gospel challenged them to re-imagine their differences as erased by the fuller experience of union in Christ when they gathered to share meals, to worship, and to grow in discipleship. We can be thankful that the NT also gives some indication of how difficult this re-imagining could be. For Paul many lesser ethical choices were subordinated to the greater good of inclusive community. For the Matthean assembly it is hard to imagine an end to the effort to seek reconciliation with a person who has wronged you. Even at the boundaries of community there is hope for a renewed relationship.

In closing, and at the risk of moving outside of my assigned territory, I want to address one more example because—to paraphrase an old saying—the proof of the gospel is in the practice. In the mid-second century an enormous epidemic (probably smallpox) surged through the Roman Empire. A century later a second plague (this time likely measles) repeated the devastation. It is estimated that 25-30% of the population died as a result of these outbreaks. It also appears that Christians had higher than the average survival rates. The sociologist Rodney Stark suggests that these rates were due to the fact that Christians continued to care for the sick when other citizens were deserting urban centres in order to save themselves. In fact, the Christian community appears also to have won converts by caring not only for their own members but for others who were ailing as well.⁹ Their goal was not to increase their numbers. Their goal appears to have been to live the gospel—to love the other, even the other who was dying, even the other who frightened them most. What they discovered is that by making room for others—especially those who were weaker—within the circle of love and mutual aid there was more room for all of them. They found the gospel in *ideas* of community certainly, but foremost in the unexpected struggle to live out those ideals in circumstances of trial that they never anticipated. They are a model for us, whatever awaits us in the coming months.

Endnotes

- 1 The study of the distinctive interests of the four evangelists is known as redaction criticism. It began in earnest after WWII, but since the 1970's has been practiced by Biblical scholars as one of the primary exegetical methods. It includes the recognition that the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was told anew by each evangelist in order to serve the needs of their communities and situations a generation or more after Jesus.
- 2 One of the last attempts to keep a sense of cohesion in Paul's thought while also recognising the fact that he has very different messages in each of his letters is J. Christiaan Beker's *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (trans. Loren T. Stuckenbruck; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).
- 3 Many scholars argue that the wording in Gal 3:28 and its connection with baptism predate Paul's quotation of it in that context. See for example Wayne Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *Journal of the History of Religions* 13/1 (1973): 165-208.
- 4 This distinction between Roman slave culture and more recent practices of slavery was first noted by Moses Finley, *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., 1968), and *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking Press, 1980).
- 5 These and other atrocities are documented by Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 9-38.
- 6 Peter Brown outlines these alleged negative characteristics of women in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 5-32.
- 7 For a recent commentary that outlines communal interests in this chapter see Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Bible & Liberation Series; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000) pp. 361-75. The observation, however, is not new; see William G. Thompson, *Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community: Matt 17:22-18:35* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970).
- 8 Note that in the Gospel of Luke this parable is remembered as one that applies to repentance (Luke 15:7). In Matthew it is simply the fact that someone might be separated from the community (18:13-14). In a non-canonical tradition (Gospel of Thomas 107) the focus is on the fact that the wandering sheep was the biggest one in the herd!
- 9 Stark discusses these details in *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 73-94.