

Karen Hollis | Jan 17, 2021

Acts 2: 2:43-47 | John 1:43-51

Theological Banquet Ecclesial: The Beloved Community

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Martin Luther King had a dream and a vision about what the global community could be; he popularized the term Beloved Community to describe a world where things like poverty, racism and prejudice will not be tolerated, rather people live by standards of human decency. King dreamed of community with an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. It is with this same spirit and the same dream that – at its best - we think about the church as the Beloved Community. This vision brings us first to this text from the second chapter of Acts. In this snapshot of the earliest Christian life, the people contribute to the whole what they have - actually everything they have - and distribute what was available as any had need. The first Beloved Community is shaped around worship and prayer, breaking bread together, and being together in this spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. They continue to welcome newcomers and make room for them at the table and in the community. This model of community - worship, fellowship, and supporting the whole – is the framework that Christian communities still use today . . . and it is this life together, this congregational life that gives life to the Ecclesials in our midst.

Congregational life includes all the things we do together from Sunday worship and Eucharist - to meetings and decisions - to offering presence and meals during a crisis - to learning and laughing together. Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian from the Ecclesial stream would say, if you dig down, the core of our life together is none of these things . . . it is our response to God's initiating presence in our midst. It is the love of God that is expressed in our love of and service to the whole community, as well as individual members. Leaning into the Ecclesial stream is about investing in the life of the community for the love of God and the good of the whole.

For Ecclesials, God is made known in congregational life: in the prayerful preparation of communion before worship, in the assembly hearing the proclamation of scripture, in the vibrant hum of coffee hour, in the faithful work of the council. The face of God is revealed in all the ways we respond to God's initiating

presence in our midst; participation in the Beloved Community prepares and equips us to be Christ in the world.

Being out of our building and worshipping online has been difficult for all of us; it is particularly difficult for the Ecclesials among us. When your faith is primarily lived out in the midst of community life, it is a sore substitute to recreate it through video gatherings and social distancing. While our congregation is doing remarkably well through this season, all of us, the longing to be together again in our well-loved building remains strong.

The long game for the Ecclesial stream is to see the church endure from age to age; this stream leans heavily on tradition and practice, not so much on innovation. They pour themselves into the vitality of the congregation and closely identify with it. The congregation's shape and practice is personal; the congregation's thriving is personal. The state of the wider church is on all of our minds, though it is most concerning to Ecclesials. Their shadow shows up in their fear of how the church will unfold into the future . . . there is a impulse to put on blinders and focus only on what is happening within the church's walls, particularly on numbers. There is a fear-based response that if we keep our numbers up, we will survive, which can go along with ignoring the shape or quality of the community life. The test of faith, if you will, for an Ecclesial is to trust in God as God leads the church forward into the future. God's way is renewal and deep faithfulness to us. When we trust in God and follow God's way, we never find ourselves lost.

Thanks be to God for the Beloved Community and those who pour themselves into its life and vitality. It is good to be together in community – it's better to be in person – but we will take what we can get, knowing the promise of being together again remains. Thanks be to God for the Body of Christ in this place and in the world – we need each other and we need the life we find here so that we can go out and serve. Thanks be to God!