

## Koinonia

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, May 22, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Acts 2:42-47](#)

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I'd like to play a little game. I'm going to play two seconds of a song and I'm wondering who can name it. If you're worshipping via zoom, type "got it" in the chat. If you're in the sanctuary, please raise your hand.

[Play first two seconds of <https://youtu.be/NcmaGplwsIQ>.]

A few people think they know it. Here are the first five seconds. [Play first five seconds.]

Well, just about everybody in the sanctuary thinks they know what it is. And it looks like quite a few in Zoom think they know what it is, too. Here are the first 10 seconds.

You've been listening to the opening seconds of the theme song for the 1980s sitcom *Cheers*. I know some of you weren't even alive in the 1980s, so the game might have been a bit unfair. My apologies.

Even those of you who were able to identify the music may not know that the theme song originally had three verses and the chorus was sung twice.<sup>1</sup> The full lyrics paint, in an amusing way, a picture of how rough life can get. One of the lines refers to your child hanging your cat up by its tail. Unfortunately, one of the lines in the original three-verse version is transphobic, so we're not going to hear the full song. Still, I do want to reflect on the lyrics as they came to be used in the opening of the show.

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.  
Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.  
Wouldn't you like to get away?  
Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name,  
and they're always glad you came.  
You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same.  
You wanna be where everybody knows your name.  
You wanna go where people know, people are all the same.  
You wanna go where everybody knows your name.

Given that the stars of the show are all white and their characters were all cisgender and heterosexual, those last two lines can be a little troubling. In fact, the claim that "people are all the same" is wrong if it is meant to be a universal statement. People are not all the same. Each of us is unique. The fact that we are each unique is one of the few things that is the same about us.

However, in the context of the rest of the song, I think the lyrics are reminding us that we all live lives filled with annoyances and hardships, and that, from time to time, we

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.lyricsondemand.com/tvthemes/cheerslyrics.html> for the full lyrics.

all need a break. We all need a place we can go where we are known and welcomed, a place where people are glad we came. In many ways, that's what *koinonia* is all about.

The author of the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles wrote these books at least 50 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and maybe as long as 75 years after.<sup>2</sup> I can't help but wonder if the author was looking back at the first years of the Jesus movement, the first years of people identifying with The Way, through nostalgic glasses. You know how nostalgia and grammar are the same? They both find the past perfect and the present tense.

There is a degree of idealism in the description we heard today about the first converts to The Way. Did they really hold all things in common? We know from the beginning of chapter 5 in Acts that this was not a universal practice. Maybe this group in Jerusalem did hold all things in common. Or maybe this was the ideal that was held by Christians in Luke's day and Luke assumes (or wants us to think) it was accomplished.

We do know that only the Jesus followers who were in Jerusalem were able to regularly go to the Temple for prayer and study, and probably to offer sacrifices. As The Way spread throughout the Roman Empire and to other areas like South Asia and Africa, going to the Temple was impossible. Instead, it was with gatherings in their homes for praying, singing, and eating that the people of The Way created community.

It appears that the first converts did the same thing. While they gathered in the Temple, they also gathered in their homes. And gathering around the table was an important part of their home gatherings.

Last week, our reading from Acts was about the dream Peter had in Joppa. Because of the dream, Peter started supporting the inclusion of non-Jews in the Jesus movement. And, in fact, this radical inclusion became a hallmark of the Jesus movement. The letter to the Galatians is probably the second oldest book in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> In it is a famous passage that may well be part of an early, early Christian statement of faith.

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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” (Galatians 3:27-28).

While the first converts to The Way could go to the Temple (since they were in Jerusalem), they couldn't go together. There were areas at the Temple where men could go that women could not. There are areas of the temple where Jewish men could go and Gentiles could not. But in their homes, when they gathered in their homes, they could (and would) all sit around the same table. When they gathered in their homes, people who were enslaved, people who were the equivalent of serfs, and people who were property owners sat together. Gender did not separate them. Previous religious identity did not separate them. For all of them had put on Christ, and were now part of one body.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 424-426.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

This is my understanding of how the church embodied *koinonia*, one of the first five vocations of the church. And, today, I think we continue to live out this vocation first and foremost at the communion table. One of the miraculous things that happens at the communion table is the building of community. As it was at the beginning of the Jesus movement, we are all equal at the table. There is nothing that separates us from each other when we gather around the table.

Of course, the communion table is not the only place where we practice *koinonia*. In my Pastoral Word email last week, I noted that, based on the responses to a questionnaire I sent the congregation in April, the most-named thing people missed during the pandemic about our worship services from before the pandemic was the sense of *koinonia* they felt when we all gathered in one room for prayer and singing and celebrating communion. No one who responded this way used the term "*koinonia*." They used words like "community." Still, I think they were talking about *koinonia*. And some may still feel like they're not getting a full measure of *koinonia* because, though we are worshiping together, we are gathered in two rooms – the sanctuary and Zoom.

This longing for *koinonia*, this longing for a place "where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came," is why the Zoom breakout rooms following worship have been so important, and why coffee hour continues to be so important to so many. *Koinonia* was an early vocation of the church because *koinonia* is important for the soul.

*Koinonia* creeps into many ministries of the church. While we spend most of our time reflecting on scripture at the Monday Morning Bible Study, we do so practicing *koinonia*. Yes, there's plenty of organizational work that gets done at Ministry Team and Cabinet meetings. And *koinonia* is practiced as well. In July, when the safe parking program returns to our parking lot, we will have the opportunity to practice the vocation of *diakonia*, the vocation Pastor Brenda talked about two weeks ago. One of the ways we will practice this vocation is by practicing *koinonia* with the guests who will be parking here. If you're interested in embodying these two vocations, talk to John Smith for more information.

From its beginning, the church has been called to a vocation of fellowship, to the vocation of *koinonia*. It was initially a countercultural vocation, for it involved the tearing down of social stratifications and separations. I believe that *koinonia* continues to be a countercultural vocation. It remains a vocation of removing stratifications and separations. It remains a vocation of inclusion that, among other things, encourages us to move beyond either/or, binary thinking.

The vocation remains. The context in which we fulfill this vocation is changing. One of the things that have been clarified by the pandemic is this: that our understanding of what it means to be church and our understandings of how we carry out our vocations are changing.

We are trying to figure out what it means to be the church and how the church carries out its vocations when, thanks to new technology, the boundaries of a local congregation are ceasing to be defined by geography. And for us in the United States where division and stratification are getting stronger and stronger (as it is, no doubt, in other

countries around the world), we need a new understanding of how we fulfill the stratification demolishing power of *koinonia*.

The vocation remains. Perhaps this look back will help us step forward.

Amen.