

Reflection: Koinonia (October 4, 2009)

It's all Greek to me! That was probably your response when you first saw the title of today's reflection. And you'd be right! *Koinonia* is a Greek word meaning *community* or *communion* – an intimate fellowship - and it was used very early on to describe the gathering of Christians to break bread, read Scriptures, pray, sing and remember. The first usage of the word in the Greek New Testament is in Acts 2: 42-47 which we read last week, describing the daily life of believers. It is sometimes associated specifically with the sacrament of communion itself, in which we participate in a union with Christ and with Christians of all times and places. On this World Communion Sunday, we pause to remember that the Communion table is 40,000 kilometres long, circling the whole earth, and that at this table, people of every age, nation, gender, ethnicity, orientation, language and denomination are one in Christ. Traditional barriers and distinctions between people are broken down. As the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians: now there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, for all are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28)

The story from Acts is a good example of how Christian community broke down traditional barriers. Paul, a male Jew of the strict Pharisaic tradition, trained not only in the Jewish Law but in the craft of tent-making, communes with Lydia, a female Gentile who is a successful businesswoman in rare dye and cloth, and who hosts the gathering of Christians in her home. This communion would have been highly unlikely both in Jewish tradition and within the expectations of Greco-Roman culture – but she and Paul are able to engage in a dialogue that eventually gives rise to one of the most beloved of the communities Paul wrote to – the church at Philippi.

First Century Christianity was known for its inclusivity – in fact, it's partly what got early Christians into trouble. The local people didn't like the blurring of the established order, of separation between male and female roles, slave and slave owner, poor peasant and wealthy landowner. The structure of society was believed to be ordained by the gods, and Christians were often accused of atheism because they did not revere those established societal norms.

The Christian community in its infancy was a radical expression of the unity of those bound together by Christ. But down through the centuries, we've had a hard time maintaining that unity. We have erected barriers between ourselves and fellow Christians, claiming our own particular brand of practice and belief as the TRUE path for followers of Christ. We have made too many of our churches places where people of like mind, background, appearance and social class gather together, and people of different mind, background, appearance and social class gather somewhere else. But it

isn't always that way; throughout the world, alternative forms of Christian community have existed, are growing and are being born.

I wonder how many of you here were part of the Student Christian Movement in your younger years? I know there are a few of you. At Bible Study this week, a couple of our participants recalled their experiences in the Movement, so that made me pay more attention to an article in the *United Church Observer* magazine this month about the SCM. It's been around for 90 years, and for all of those 90 years it has brought young people across Christian denominations and even of no Christian faith together for social action on justice issues, inspired by the prophetic call of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Student Christian Movement "questioned traditional interpretations of Christianity, advocated for union rights at the height of McCarthyism, protested the war in Vietnam and fought for nuclear disarmament. Most recently, they've campaigned in and out of churches for inclusiveness of all sexual orientations and gender identities." (*p. 14 September 2009 issue*) Christian young people have been drawn to the SCM through the call of social activism, and others who began as atheists or agnostics, have been drawn to Christ by experiencing a radical community that breaks down barriers and stands up for justice in Jesus' name. This too, is *koinonia*, communion.

Let me tell you about another community: a group of women in Whitehorse gathered in the late 80s and early 90s, to explore a woman-centred approach to Christian spirituality. We ranged in age from 16 to 60-something. We were students, doctors, homemakers, teachers, lawyers, nurses, salesclerks, businesswomen – you name it. We were single, married, with children or childless, lesbian, straight and bisexual. We gathered in each others' homes, sharing song, food, personal stories, rituals and Scripture together. We used liturgies, prayers, reflections and music by people like Carolyn McDade, Keri Wehlander, Joyce Rupp, Joan Chittester and Miriam Therese Winter. We explored Bible stories about women – the texts that lift women up and the texts in which women are victimized. We spoke of our experiences of being women in the church and in the community – the places where we found ourselves shunted aside and devalued and the places where our gifts were valued and lifted up. We lit candles, walked a labyrinth stamped in the snow, created artwork together, hiked in the outdoors, danced our prayers – explored and expressed our spirituality in many different ways. This is *koinonia*, communion.

How many of you have been by the church on a Thursday morning? For those who don't know, Thursday is maintenance day at the church, and the coffee pot is always on at 10:00, with the water boiling for tea, and goodies pulled from the fridge or freezer.

Those who've been working hard since first thing in the morning take a well-earned break, and others who wander in about that time are always welcome to join in. We've had as few as three and as many as a dozen people gathered around the table in the Hall, and our age range goes from 3 to –well – I don't think I better say out loud the age of the oldest person present, or I might get in trouble! Sometimes we talk about church stuff, and sometimes we just shoot the breeze, but we're all there because this church matters to us – because we are disciples of Jesus Christ who've committed to be together. This, also, is *koinonia*, communion.

Other examples of *Koinonia* are Kairos gatherings or Victoria's Multifaith Action committee or the national Faith and the Common Good network – where people of different religious backgrounds or no religious background work together to challenge oppressive patterns in society. Look at the Multifaith Chaplaincy at UVic, who are currently sponsoring a series of dialogues on the subject of Spirituality and Religion - trying to bring the religious, the “spiritual but not religious”, and the atheist or agnostic together for intelligent dialogue and increased understanding. So far – it's a roaring success. This too, may become *Koinonia*, though as far as I know, there's no bread and wine involved! In a few weeks, UVic United Church Chaplain Henri Lock will be with us to talk about his work at the University, and especially the Meditation group he leads which draws people to learn about Christian practices of meditation. The students gather afterward for a meal of soup and buns sponsored by local United Churches. The students and the churches, though they may never meet face to face, are part of *koinonia*.

I'm going to give you one more example: in 2004 a group of United Church Women journeyed to Zambia to visit projects and programs being funded through the United Church's Beads of Hope campaign – the project that raised over \$2 million for HIV/AIDS related work. As we travelled in minibuses with men and women from our partner organizations in Zambia, a new Christian community was formed: First Nations, Jamaican-Canadian, Afro-Canadian and European -Canadian women of all ages joined with Zambian men and women – most of whom were relatively young – in conversation, story-telling, and most of all, singing and dancing – yes, even on the buses! We had tough conversations, shared tears and passion for change, challenge and support. We were fed from meagre resources, and welcomed in the spirit of Christ. Many of us have maintained relationships via the Internet in the years since. Across the divide of thousands of kilometres, race, age, economic status, theological and cultural differences, *Koinonia* was formed.

This is what Christian community is. It does not have to exist in a church; it may or may not be explicitly named as Christian or even as community. It may exist within formal structures, or simply emerge out of a felt need or a spiritual longing. I want to tell you what Sara Miles, the author of “Take This Bread” has to say.

Sara, raised as an atheist, a journalist who covered stories in some of the most dangerous parts of the world, a bisexual woman who had all kinds of issues with the Christianity she thought she knew and its judgmentalism and exclusion, found herself walking into a church one Sunday and taking communion – and it changed everything for her. She found out that being a Christian is about hunger: hunger for the bread that nourishes life, hunger for righteousness, the hunger to feed and be fed. Sara started up a food bank at her new church, and saw in the diverse and multifaceted group of people who both visited and served at the food bank, a face of Christian community she had not expected to find. But she found that she still needed to deal with the other kind of Christian community: the kind that meets on Sunday morning and meets the needs of its members and is full of loving, well-meaning people who just don’t want very much at all to change because they love and are committed to what they know. She found herself endlessly frustrated by the difference between *her* vision of church as a place that welcomes not only the stranger but the really strange and feeds the hungry in spirit and in body, and the church as it is, with all its gifts and frailties. This all came to a head when she wanted to open the Food Pantry on Sunday mornings. She writes:

A former Jesuit who sang in the choir took me aside, pointing out that I was hardly the first person to get excited about Jesus, then disappointed in his church. “Get over yourself,” he said, not unkindly. “Welcome to Christianity. This is just the beginning.”

She goes on to quote Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who wrote that

“unity is a gospel imperative when we recognize that it opens us to change, to conversion: when we realize how our life with Christ is somehow bound up with our willingness to abide with those we think are sinful, and those we think are stupid.” {A friend of mine added, and with those who think we are sinful or stupid!} (Take this Bread, p.254-255)

Christian community, *Koinonia*, is emphatically NOT about just a gathering of similar people with similar interests and similar backgrounds. While it can begin that way, the truest forms of *koinonia* bring people together with those whom they might never otherwise want to be with: people who are of different theological viewpoints, people of

different generations, people of different ethnic, cultural or linguistic backgrounds, people of different gender or sexual orientation, and more. What do these stories of Koinonia say to you about this Christian Community? What do they say to you about the Worldwide Communion we celebrate today?