

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2022

(Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30)

In 1939, a little less than six years before his execution in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer published a book entitled *Life Together*. Completed in a span of just four weeks, many consider it one of the best examinations of the value of Christian life in community ever written. In this brief work, which grew out of a two-year period when he served as director of what was out of necessity an underground seminary in Germany, Bonhoeffer outlines his thoughts on the basic idea of the Church as a place where Christians gather. He also lays out his ideas on community as the crucible for joint work done to praise God and care for the world around them.

As Bonhoeffer writes, “In their loneliness, both the visitor and the one visited recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body. They receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other’s blessings as the blessing of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if there is so much happiness and joy even in a single encounter of one Christian with another, what inexhaustible riches must invariably be revealed to those who by God’s will are privileged to live in daily community life with other Christians!”¹

I was put in the mindset of community early in the week as I read today’s passage from Acts. We find signs of community throughout these verses. We learn, for instance, that Dorcas had made clothing for the widows of the town of Joppa, tunics these members of the community tearfully showed Peter after his arrival. After Dorcas’ death, *they* washed her and *they* laid her in an upstairs room, unnamed members of the community of those who loved Dorcas caring for her in death the way she cared for them in life. The disciples in Joppa sent two from among their group ... representatives of this community of believers ... on a journey of nearly 12 miles to Lydda (a four- or five-hour walk)² to summon Peter.

Let’s put this scene within the context of Bonhoeffer’s words. Dorcas and the widows – and all who cared for her after her death – received and met each other, perhaps with reverence, humility and joy. They blessed one another, and they received blessings. Likely the single encounters they had with one another over the days and weeks of life together in Joppa revealed “inexhaustible riches” of love, care, and – in this instance – a powerful, shared grief.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together - Prayerbook of the Bible* (Fortress Press), p. 29.

² Craig S. Keener. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Volume 2 – 3:1-14:28* (Baker Academic), p. 1714.

I love Bonhoeffer's phrase: *inexhaustible riches*. It brings to my mind images of a well that never runs dry ... a manna that never runs out ... a love that never ends. It's the presence of God that never fades ... the embrace of God that never lessens ... the voice of God that never grows silent. They are riches that never end ... blessings that never fail.

As I was writing this sermon that phrase ... actually a slightly altered version: "love never faileth" ... came to mind, and it triggered what I thought was the memory of a familiar old hymn. When I looked it up, I found it *was* in fact a hymn (one point for my memory!), but one totally unfamiliar to me (point immediately taken away!). Penned by the 19th-century writer and composer Flora Kirkland, the third verse was the one that stood out to me:

*See, they are waiting, Looking at you,
Furtively watching All that you do:
Seeming so careless, Harden'd and lost.
"Love never faileth," Count not the cost,
"Love never faileth," Count not the cost.*³

Waiting ... looking ... watching: three words describing what the community out there is doing ... *right now*. They are waiting for us. They are looking at us. They are watching us. Unfortunately, at this point in history, many are doing so through a lens of skepticism ... something revealed in a recent national Ipsos survey commissioned by the Episcopal Church and released in early March. One question "asked what characteristics respondents associate with Christians. The words most chosen by the Christian respondents were 'giving,' 'compassionate,' 'loving' and 'respectful,' while non-Christians associated Christians most with 'hypocritical,' 'judgmental,' 'self-righteous' and 'arrogant.'"⁴

When I first read that, I was stunned ... and saddened. Admittedly this caused me to spend some time looking at how my own actions – not just as a priest, but as an Episcopalian and a Christian – might be viewed by others. The readings for this week, though, shifted my focus. Rather than being a cause for worry and handwringing, the results of this survey ... the results of our looking into the needs of this area ... instead present us with tremendous opportunity.

We have opportunities to show what community ... *this* community ... is about.

Over the past week I've been overjoyed to witness examples of the work and worship of community. Saturday one week ago, several of us gathered as a community of family and friends to stand witness and support two of our parishioners as they were

³ "Love Never Faileth." Hymnary.org, <https://hymnary.org/hymn/GSE1902/page/197>.

⁴ "Episcopal Church releases 'Jesus in America' study; polling data shows wide-ranging faith views." Episcopal News Service, March 9, 2022. <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/03/09/episcopal-church-releases-jesus-in-america-study-polling-data-shows-wide-ranging-faith-views/>

joined together in Holy Matrimony. Last Sunday we gathered after our service, and I talked to you as a community about where you may feel called to serve as we build this parish. On Monday, Amy and I joined some of our incredible, dedicated outreach volunteers as a subset of this community and served our first monthly meal for the members of the community at Road to Recovery. On Wednesday, I accepted the invitation from our neighbors at Jefferson Forest to join others as a community of judges for the school's history day competition ... talking with and encouraging the talents and interests of incredible young students.

I'm sure many of you in the past week experienced examples of the work of community. I'd wager many of you in ways great and small heard, in the words of John's Gospel, the voice of Jesus ... and you responded. But on this Fourth Sunday of Easter – a day known as Good Shepherd Sunday – I believe one message we find ... one call we're receiving ... is Jesus is calling us to explore the opportunities we're discovering. Yes, we're the sheep who hear and recognize the voice of Jesus, but we're also shepherds in our own right, inspired to call out to the flocks we find in the world around us. I believe the new opportunities we're discovering ... the new works we're being led to accomplish in answer to God's call to us ... will be a visible testimony to those around us about God and God's love - and ours – for *them*, whoever they are and whatever their circumstances.

We have opportunities to reach into the various flocks in our world and work *for* and *with* them, honoring them as not only our neighbors but as siblings in the family of creation. We have opportunities to demonstrate the giving, compassion, love and respect marking who we are and diminish the view of hypocrisy, judgment, self-righteousness, and arrogance seem to see.

We have an opportunity ... as sheep, as shepherds, as community ... to unlock *inexhaustible riches*. In the words of the final verse of Kirkland's hymn:

*“Love never faileth,” Love is pure gold;
Love is what Jesus Came to unfold.
Make us more loving, Master, we pray;
Help us remember Love is thy way,
Help us remember Love is thy way.*

Amen.