

Christian Fellowship

Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

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How good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in unity [...]
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore. (Psalm 133:1, 3b)

Both in ancient Israel and in the early Church of Jesus Christ there was a strong sense that God offers us his blessings and great joy when people are truly in community, in fellowship, with one another.

There is beauty in community, in harmonious relations between people. This is true in families, in offices, in social clubs, in *all* relationships we have.

Immediately after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, his disciples began to meet together in unison, as they needed one another. Even Thomas, who did not immediately believe the resurrection story, did stay inside that community, as he needed his friends.

Being together in unity is something most of us enjoy deeply. This is not strange; we are born as social beings. The Jewish social philosopher Martin Buber wrote in one of his books:

All life emerges out of community and strives for community. Community is the wellspring of life. [Martin Buber, *Alte und Neue Gemeinschaft* (1976), p. 51]

The Roman Catholic Pope Paul VI wrote something similar in his pastoral letter *Gaudium et Spes* (1965):

God did not create man as a solitary,
for from the beginning "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27).
Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal commun-
ion.

For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.

Man is a social being, and just *cannot* live without others. We are all in need of other people. But we must also admit, we do not succeed very well in living in such community. We are torn in two directions; we love fellowship, but we continue to do things that break community down.

Of course usually we think it is the other that breaks it down, we are professionals at pointing at others...

Sociologists will point to the breakdown of organic communal life in societies that are affected by industrialization and urbanization. Community life breaks down in societies where the mobility of people increases, and where work and life no longer circle around family and village relationships.

200 years ago most people in the world would live very close to their parents, brother, sisters, grandparents, and a million cousins. Nowadays, we move around countries, even around the world, for work; our natural links with our families are thereby breaking down.

But to assume that the communal life in the past was so much better than it is today, is, I think, a clear example of romanticism. The past was not much better than today. Even in the very first community described in the bible, one brother clobbered the other to death, and since then, man has been a habitual sinner against his fellow man.

The Psalm we read, speaks of brothers who *live together*; that in itself was nothing special 2500 years ago. Of course brothers would live together in that communal society – and that life together could often be very hard and relationships could be awful.

Especially when such communities demanded a high level of uniformity, living in groups could be chocking the life out of people.

The blessing of God was promised for brothers and sisters who *live together*, **and** who do so *in unity*.

Mind you, unity – not uniformity. A community can consist of very different people with very different ideas and lifestyles, but still be a unity – if that community has some common heart, a center all people are focused on, and when people also really care about one another – irrespective of their differences.

How can we, as a Church here, live together in such unity, in such manner that we here and today experience the blessings of God as described in the Psalm?

The Apostle John, who had been one of the closest friends of the Lord Jesus Christ, has some important things to say about this in his letter.

[We] proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

We write this to make our joy complete. (1 John 1:2-4)

John wrote his letter so that those who would read it, would believe in that eternal life, Jesus Christ, and thereby also join the fellowship of the believers: ‘We proclaim [the Gospel], so that you may have fellowship with us.’

There are many ways in which we can describe the Church, but the relational term fellowship is, I believe, a very important one.

John wants the people

- 1) to *believe in Jesus Christ*, so that they thereby
- 2) *enjoy the Christian fellowship* and
- 3) as a fellowship of believers, says John, we are placed in a *relationship of fellowship with God the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*.

St John presents us here with a very communal, non-individualist view of the Church and of life with God; the goal of the preaching of the Gospel is that all people as a community, together, enjoy communion with God.

It is impossible to speak about our Christian fellowship without also touching this relationship with God. The Anglican theologian John Stott commented on the verses of St John that we have read. He warned us to not be easily content:

...with a Church life whose principle of cohesion is a superficial social camaraderie instead of a spiritual fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. [John Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Leicester, 1960, 1983), p. 64]

What is the meaning of this spiritual fellowship with God that St John speaks about? Allow me to briefly just touch upon a few key-thought about community with God.

God himself is in essence a communal being. He lives eternally in love and peace and joy in Himself; and in Jesus Christ he has extended the hand of fellowship to us, small human beings, as well. That is where our pilgrimage to knowing God begins.

God's desire is to draw each of us up to him, to participate in the intimacy of the community of the Trinity. He has created mankind with this in mind; in eternity we will experience this in its full extent, and even on earth, we already get a foretaste.

Communion with God can be experienced personally, in prayer, when we see Gods glory in nature, and when we listen to the Word of God as read in Church and at home.

But the foretaste of this relationship with God is not meant to be experienced individually in the first place, but within the community of the Church.

Community with God is in an intense manner experienced in the common worship of the Church. The British-Canadian theologian J.I. Packer writes in his beautiful book *Concise Theology* about this:

The Church is, was, and always will be a single worshipping community, permanently gathered in the true sanctuary, which is the heavenly Jerusalem, the place of God's presence. [J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, (Wheaton, 1993), p. 201]

Worship, therefore, brings us as a community directly into the presence of God. And this is not only true for worship in mighty cathedrals, but also for our worship here each week. It transports us to the place of God's presence.

But it is not only the formal worship of the Church that brings us closer to God. *All aspects* of the community life of our Church are worship, and a carriage of the majesty and love of God.

He is especially present when individual beings are open to one another, communicate with one another, and help one another.

And this brings us back to the importance of the Christian community, the fellowship of us here in Maadi.

If our fellowship is the vehicle for our relationship with God, what a great motivation we then have for living together as brothers and sisters in unity. That is where our God becomes more than a theory, but where we encounter Him.

As we are created in the image of God - as social beings - it is not strange that exactly when man is together, we are at the right place for getting a glimpse of God.

Hmm well, yes, I know, this sounds easier said than done. Nice big words by the great St John. Is he not a little bit too esoteric now? Easy for a saint... Is he too flowery about Christian communion? Actually, I do not think so.

The Apostle gives us some important building blocks for strengthening our fellowship here in Maadi, and for a saint he is actually very realistic about human nature. Let me repeat what he writes:

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

The one single most important thing that destroys the fellowship, John says, is sin. That means: *thinking or doing things* that hurt other people and that dishonor God. Or *not doing the things* that are good for others and pleasing to God.

What destroys Christian communion as the interface with God, is not whether we use an organ or a piano, or whether we use the book of common prayer from the USA or Australia, what sort of communion bread we use, or whether all aspects of the liturgy go always perfectly perfect, or whether we read from the word of God in the proper accent, and it does not matter whether we are members of the right Church or not.

What destroys Christian communion is old-fashioned sin, because that is a strong wedge in relationships.

John was very realistic about this. He says: do not even think of denying that there is sin in your midst – because that is normal.

But do not hide it, rather, confess it. If you have done something wrong, confess it to God, and if necessary, also to one another.

Fellowship requires direct relations between people, who relate to one another without excluding any dimension of their lives - so the darker sides of our being cannot be excluded. We meet with one another just as we are.

Sins confessed are sins forgiven. But if sin is allowed to grow in the corners of our hearts and minds, it will deeply damage ourselves, our families, and the whole community of the Church.

In a community of people, vulnerability and the humility of confessing that we are utterly imperfect, and that we all need forgiveness, are very strong glue that cements us together as living stones in the worshipful temple of God.

Or to use a simile from agriculture: confessing our sins is like manure on the land of our fellowship. Initially it stinks, but it makes the fruit of communion grow.

This ability to confess sins, the strength to be vulnerable and humble, does not come easily. It only grows in a community that accepts that we are all imperfect pilgrims on the way, where we are prepared to accept one another and forgive the flaws in the other – as they forgive ours.

That behavior is in line with the habits of Jesus, who is the focus of the community. That is the second very important building block for our community life. The focus should not be on community as such, but on center of our community, Jesus Christ.

True community grows when we as members, each personally, focus on Him who is the heart of the community. Such community is difficult to organize, as it is organic, something alive.

But it is certainly a challenge for us: How do we contribute to the life of our community? As open people, open to one another, and by personally focusing on Jesus Christ.

To be on the way together in this manner, as pilgrims with Christ, humbly and vulnerable, is something powerful. It is in that togetherness that each pilgrim can meet with God.

Think of Thomas, the disciple who had grave doubts about the resurrection of Christ. Of course he was fully right to doubt, because the story was just so unbelievable.

St John wrote about Thomas and in that story he shows the importance of the community of believers that centers on Jesus Christ.

The disciples had seen Jesus after his resurrection, St John describes that Jesus appears to them when they are together; no wonder they believe in Him:

But Thomas (...), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:19-20, 24-25)

I can image why Thomas had difficulty believing the enthusiastic stories of his fellow disciples. A man who died on a cross, was buried for three days, and then, alive? Risen from the dead in bodily shape? But in spite of his unbelief, St John writes:

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.

The fact that Thomas had doubts, did not lead to his ostracism from the community of believers. As someone whose life had been touched by Jesus, Thomas was warmly welcome, even though he did not have his theology straightened out; even though he had not encountered Jesus Christ as the son of God yet. And then:

Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:26-28)

Thomas met with Jesus Christ and his doubts were taken away in the community of the Church. Jesus used that fellowship to appear again and open the eyes of Thomas.

Our community here in Maadi does not exist for itself. It exists for the worship of our God who has drawn us up into communion with Him.

And it exists for us, pilgrims on the road of Christ - so that together we learn more about who God is, and so that we meet with the Creator while worshipping and while living together.

As a community here, of kings and paupers, saints and sinners, together we confess our sins, we kneel together before our Lord, and in doing so, we open ourselves to also meet with our God; in our community we experience a little bit of that, as a small down payment of the great things that are yet to come.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.