

2 Easter 2021

"And all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

--Acts 2

Christian communes go back to the time of the apostles. In medieval times, monasteries were formed to pray, learn, meditate, and work, apart from the world. For baby boomers, we know communes to be those of the 1960's and 70's as centers of protest, music, and simple living apart from the evils of society. Many were Christian based, some not so much. They seemed to be a beacon of love and Christ-centered living that was attractive to many growing up, looking for something other than the traditional values of their parents. Many found the love and support of a "family" that they felt was missing in their lives. Others simply were having difficulty justifying the values of society which tolerated racism, violence, and war.

But lest you think that these groups ended in the 1970's, "Intentional" Christian communities, as they are now called, have continued to thrive.

Surprisingly, not all the communities from the past have gone away.

Twin Oaks is an intentional community found in rural central Virginia.

According to their website, they are made up made up of around 90 adult members and 15 children. They report that "Since the community's beginning in 1967, our way of life has reflected our values of cooperation,

sharing, nonviolence, equality, and ecology. We welcome you to schedule a visit.”

Twin Oaks Community is located on the traditional territory of the Monacan and Mannahoac peoples (now merged as the Monacan Indian Nation. Their bylaws call for them to strive to eliminate sexism, racism, ageism, and competitiveness. One thing that I liked is that their mission includes a call to dismantle colonialism and acknowledge their position as settlers on stolen land. This part of a larger move toward Truth and Reconciliation work.

Another such group was started back in 1971 and still going. ‘The Farm’ is an intentional community of families and friends living on three square miles in middle Tennessee, founded on the principles of nonviolence and respect for the earth.

Not everyone sells all that they have to relocate. Many choose to intermittently move to a community, for up to a year, and then return to their homes. People are still rejecting materialism and seeking more intimate relationships with others. They seek out others who share their values. Obviously, the pandemic has affected this, but the desire for these relationships have only intensified. Intentional communities can function online, but it is simply not as intense and maintaining the focus can be exhausting.

One of the more sustainable communities is found in Americus Georgia.

Koinonia was founded back in 1942. Their website states: “We strive to love our neighbor and our foes alike, share what we have, and be active peacemakers. We offer internships for those interested in seeking an experience in our shared life of prayer, work, study, service, and fellowship. It is not a traditional internship. Though there will be work assignments, it is not a “work” or a “farm” internship but, rather, it is more holistic in nature — it is an immersion into a way of life.”

Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England started the community as a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.” I love this term. “This meant a community of believers sharing their lives and resources, following the example of the first Christian communities as described in the Acts of the Apostles”. Hence, why I chose this community to talk about based upon our first reading this morning. The other reason that I wanted to talk about them is because of two people most of us know. Vicki Hesse and Leah McCullough, both from our Diocese, are serving a 3-month internship at Koinonia.

Their website goes on to say: “Koinonians shared not only faith and resources, but also work. We farmed the land for our livelihood and sought

ways to work in partnership with the land, “to conserve the soil, God’s holy earth” (Clarence Jordan). We preached, taught, and were members of local churches. From the beginning, Koinonians emphasized the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people. When we could afford to hire seasonal help, Black and White workers were paid a fair, equal wage. When the community and its guests and workers prayed or ate a meal, we all sat together at the table, regardless of color. Our commitment to racial equality, pacifism, and economic sharing brought bullets, a bomb, and a boycott in the 1950s, as the KKK and others attempted to force us out. We responded with prayer, nonviolent resistance, and a renewed commitment to live the Gospel. We created a mail-order business, which continues to sustain our community today”.

One of their primary sources of revenue is their pecan business. Pecans can be purchased in their store, but the main source is by mail and online ordering. On March 29 and 30th, The Great Koinonia Pecan Sort-a-Thon was held and reportedly was a great success! There were teams of people hand-sorting pecans for 24 hours straight. I guess it was a pretty tight competition between the Flaming Hot Red Robins, Mellow Yellows, Great Green O’Geckos, and Purple Fox Squirrels. Not sure who may have won but I did find out the Vicki was a Mello Yellow. I was betting on the Flaming

Hot Red Robins. I did want to mention that one of more lasting projects that came out of Koinonia, was a housing initiative called Habitat For Humanity.

This all brings me back to our reading from Acts. It is not a reach for me to see Paul and Peter as members of a commune wearing sandals and robes. Even Jesus for that matter, since he worked against The Establishment and preached for The People. It was a big reason why I could so easily identify with the musical Jesus Christ Superstar. One could listen to the Rock Music with incense and candles burning while worshipping in the process. It was a vehicle that resonated with Christian youth at the time especially for those in Christian communes. But I digress.

The early disciples followed Jesus while not having the full understanding of his message. Once Jesus departed to go back to God, they were left with either banding together in community or returning to whatever their previous lives had been. It only made sense that those who believed would stay close to one another, maybe for protection, and probably out of a shared vision. As Luke said, "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart...."

They believed that in a true and faithful Christian community, no one is left behind; no one is lost; no one is hungry; no one is cold; and all are welcome at Christ's table.

The first disciples left their homes and occupations and followed Jesus. The early church left behind their religious traditions, family expectations, security and — risking their very lives — shared openly and freely of what they had with each other.

Discipleship is not possible without leaving something behind. To be a sharing community of faith, we must be willing to leave our comfort zones, leave behind materialistic values, abandon traditional notions of wealth — if we are going to be the compassionate community Jesus envisioned the church to be.

The church today is in danger of losing the sense of “leaving” the world and its values, and instead has become “joiners,” adapting and imitating the culture in an effort to be relevant — forgetting that it is more important to be **real**, than to be relevant. We must remember that we are not self-sufficient even though world tells us we are. As Christians, we cannot live independently of each other. And this is both a privilege and a responsibility.

Bonhoeffer notes that “Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick,

the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing.” End quote.

This past year has only served to remind us of just how important community is. Sadly, those who considered the church building to be the life source of living in community found that this simply did not work. Many instead found discouragement, anger, and loneliness. Many others drifted off without a lifeline. They were unable to discover new ways to be together via livestreaming worship, emails, phone calls, and even letter writing. My prayer is that as the next few months go by, and in-person worship becomes safer and more common, folks will return to community. Either way, we will return to a ‘new normal’ whatever that may look like. The early Christian communities were drawn by their love for Jesus and each other in the midst of a society bent on their destruction. In so many ways, we find ourselves in the same arena. We need Jesus and we need each other for communities to thrive. Our mission has not changed. Through our love Jesus and each other, it is time to leave our comfort zones, go out into the world, and lead by example, by taking care of each other.

Amen!