

## “They Devoted Themselves to Fellowship”

Acts 2:42-47

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The Greek word is Koinonia. The English word is fellowship. What these words describe is an intentional, radical caring for one another. This is how the author of The Acts of the Apostles names the earliest gatherings of Christian people. Before they were known as churches, they were seen as circles of men, women, youth, and children who dedicated themselves to caring for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of each other. No one went hungry. No one grieved alone. No one suffered isolation. Everyone thrived because Koinonia, fellowship, was elevated as the highest value.

Today, where churches claim this notion of Koinonia, bulletin boards are smothered with announcements regarding support groups. There might be a support group for people living with multiple sclerosis. There might be a dream club for those who want help interpreting strange dreams. There might be a transitioning group for those in-between jobs. There might be a moms-morning-out group, a children’s play group, a support group for bereavement, a place to gather to share the challenge of parenting one’s parents. Where churches claim this notion of Koinonia, people are alive because someone is listening, someone is tuning in, someone is taking the time to care.

In 1993, while I was exploring options for my first sabbatical, I wrote to Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia, a Christian commune founded by the New Testament scholar, Clarence Jordon. Some of you have heard of Koinonia Farm.

It's the place where God gave a vision to Millard Fuller to build affordable homes, a vision that would become Habitat for Humanity, a ministry of intense Koinonia, where people care about each other so much that they build a decent house for a neighbor who's living in a shack. I wanted to experience that intentional New Testament community we read about in the Acts of the Apostles, so I wrote to Koinonia Farm. I was just about to give up on them when I received a letter back saying something that made my heart sing.

“Dear Richard, come on down;  
we'll have fellowship with you.”

I took the reply to mean that I could count on being in a community where I would have a deep soak in what it means to care for other human beings and what it means to be cared for by one's neighbor.

I suppose it is possible for a church to thrive without Koinonia, but I don't know of any that do. Last Sunday, when I returned from the Confirmation Retreat, I went to my office where I noticed a brightly decorated envelope. It was from a 10 year old girl in this church. She had just had her birthday party to which she had invited her friends, asking them to bring no gifts for her, but to bring a gift of cash for the middle school youth mission trip from her church, heading to Heifer Project International in Rutland, Massachusetts. There was \$155 in that envelope! Shawn Perry cares deeply about other human beings. She wants third world villagers to eat as well as she eats, to wrap themselves in woolen blankets as she does, and to enjoy a little honey in their tea as her grandmother does. When she practices this alternative giving style, she is teaching us about Koinonia, about fellowship, about noticing what other people need and then acting decisively to do something about it! Shawn Perry, I thank you, publicly. You are our teacher.

At the end of March, my Wisconsin grandson, Lucas, turned five. I decided to give him a special gift, perhaps something he didn't already have. I wanted to give him the JOY that comes with Koinonia, with caring about another human being.

I tucked a \$10 bill into the birthday card and explained that his parents would help him locate a child who has no toys or no warm jacket or no book to read, and then he could give the \$10 to that child; and that is when he will receive the joy! I wanted Lucas to have a taste of fellowship at a young, tender, formative age. I wanted him to catch a whiff of Koinonia, what it means to notice and to care for somebody whose need is very real. He hasn't thanked me yet; but one day he will.

On Monday night, I got the call that Bruce Letizia had been killed in a car accident off Route 84 near Southington. His wife, Stephanie, is the head teacher at the South Church Nursery School. On Tuesday morning, I walked over to the school to see how the teachers were managing with this sad news. What I heard is that the teachers had all gone over to Stephanie's house at midnight and had entered into her grief for a time, sharing the weight of it. They were offering Koinonia. It was the deep kind of caring that is humbling to receive and even more humbling to offer. It is a model of fellowship if ever there was one.

If I had to name my five most favorite Bible stories, included in that short list would be Mark's account of the paralyzed man with four friends. The four friends refuse to let their colleague languish, unable to walk. Though there appears to be no cure for the paralysis, they have heard of a healer, the carpenter's son, from Nazareth. These friends grab a hold of the four corners on his mat, carry him to the house where Jesus is teaching, and when they can't get in through the door due to the large crowd, they hoist him up onto the roof, cut a hole in the tile, and lower their friend down into the house with ropes. They see the human need.

They hatch a plan. They act on the plan. They offer a radical form of Koinonia, a level of caring rarely witnessed, and a healing ensues.

One of the greatest challenges to Koinonia in our culture today is that the phrase 'I need' is on the list of endangered species. I don't know about women, but with men, it's like we have a built in censor button with a ten second time delay. If we were ever to actually formulate in our voice box these two words... 'I need'... some internal mechanism fires a signal that paralyzes the tongue and prevents those two words from escaping out of our mouths and into thin air. Here's what it sounds like.

How are you, Bill? FINE! How you doing, Bob? COULDN'T BE BETTER! You okay, Tom? FANTASTICO!

If there is a short supply of fellowship these days, especially among men, it has to do with the cultural taboo around the words, 'I need.' Koinonia among men will have a resurrection when those words find their way off the endangered species list.

In the modern era, the word 'fellowship' has taken on a narrower meaning than its New Testament usage. Nowadays, it tends to refer to a specific group of women or men or youth who meet periodically; a women's fellowship or a men's fellowship or a youth fellowship. Or it is used to name a room in a church, the Fellowship Room. But really it is meant to be a much broader term. Koinonia is the life-blood of a faith community. It is the daily bread. Churches who claim it and savor it and nurture it and indulge themselves in it; in the generous, sustained caring of one human being for another; these are the churches that are thriving. We can hire someone to preach sermons. We can hire somebody to run the church school. We can hire someone to direct the music ministry. We can hire someone to organize the youth mission trips. But the concept of Koinonia falls into the hands of all of us.

It is the work of those who joined the church in 1958 and of those joining in 2008 and of everyone in-between. Observing the vitality of the early church community, the author of the Acts of the Apostles writes, “They devoted themselves to fellowship.” Sisters and brothers, let us be known in the town as the ones who live out this ancient value day by day. In the greatest of hope, Amen.