

Koinonia

I don't often use Greek words in my sermons for a couple of reasons. The most obvious is that I often have trouble pronouncing English words much less those of another language. Although I did well in most aspects of my language studies at seminary---pronouncing the words in order to read in the language was something I never achieved. Yet I wanted to use this Greek word—koinonia—this morning because the translations for it are used so often when talking about Christian community life that we don't pay attention to how our relationship with Christ does or should alter our understanding of the most often used word for koinonia. The most common meaning of the word as translated is fellowship. Specifically the word refers to Christian fellowship which includes communion with God and participation in bringing God's kingdom into reality. That was the understanding of this community life among the early believers. We frequently reduce the concept of Christian fellowship to social interactions, group activities, etc. which just happen to take place at church or with the people who attend church with us. In theological terms the word is meant to describe the relationships, plural, experienced by Christians with God, with Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit as well as the relationships among themselves. All the lectionary readings this morning relate in some way to understanding the community formed by those who come together to worship God. The very brief psalm which we read first this morning begins: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." This is called a song of ascent because people coming to Jerusalem, often from great distances in pilgrim groups went up to worship at the temple. They would joyously sing this as they traveled together because they were going to a festival celebrating the blessings which flowed from their relationship to God and to each other. It has become associated with Easter because this is a celebratory time in the Christian year. The Hebrew word used here to describe the group can be translated as brother or kindred. This means it can refer to blood relatives or it can also refer to a larger extended family group or to the relationship which develops among those who together worship God: in other words, the people who are joined together by God's grace. Or this kindred could represent us. This unity in relationship with God and with each other is compared to two items in the Psalm: oil and water. Both are liquids which carry the image of something that can flow and is not always contained. In both cases in this Psalm, the oil and water are so abundant that they overflow expected boundaries. The oil placed upon the head of Aaron covers not only his head but runs down the face and beard and over the robes he wore. The dew which fell on Mount Hermon flowed beyond that mountain down to Mount Zion over a hundred miles away where the Temple stood. God's blessing is upon this unity which overflows and spreads outward. This unity is pronounced good using the same word found in Genesis when God viewing creation pronounced it good. In Genesis we also find that God deemed that it was not good for humanity to be alone. In this short Psalm we have the understanding that unity in God brings blessings which flow downward from God and outward from their origin in an abundant way to cover all the people. We look upon this Psalm and many other readings from the Hebrew Scriptures from the other side of the resurrection—we are Easter people. Faith in the risen Christ draws people—not only to see things from this Easter point of view, but to see things with our fellow Christians. The risen Lord creates a new family of those who believe in him. In

the Gospel passage from John, Jesus tells Thomas in chapter 20, verse 29, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The Gospel flows down freely from the summit of Easter’s revelation and makes one family in Christ through faith. This is what is described in the passage from Acts 4:33. “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” This passage from Acts is about what type of life flows from that connectedness to their risen Lord and each other. The community came into being because of the resurrection. This is the heart of the apostolic community. It exists because Jesus has been raised and the community lives the life it does because of the Holy Spirit’s presence among them. It is the resurrection which has made Jesus significant. Because the resurrection begins to make a reality of all that Jesus preached and promised even though the crucifixion had put a complete end to it—until Easter dawned. The resurrection is the means by which grace is let loose in the world. Because of resurrection, the Spirit is present and dwells within us. This is how the life God intends for the world is experienced and lived. Acts 4: 32, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” Verse 34-35 continues: “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” That’s quite a picture of an extraordinary community, startlingly “at one” and with the most amazing sense of community and care for one another. This sense of community is not a new idea for these early believers who were grounded in the teachings of Yahweh which formed the basis for their identity as Jews. Deuteronomy 15: 4-11 provides for a Sabbath year—a time when all indebtedness is cancelled so that “there will be no one in need among you.” But this has not been historic Israel’s experience. In the Old Testament, the prophets continually told the people how they were failing to live as God had shown them. Nation-states and empires lived and thrived only to the extent they had the power to do so over against their enemies. But that form of survival living is repeated at every level. Fracture and division are symptoms of what is wrong in the world. People divide into small and smaller interest groups in order to prosecute their own cause over against others. We know that story too well. We are extraordinarily aware of the interconnectedness of our planet and its peoples. We are also very aware of groups using power to take advantage of the less powerful. When the Psalmist speaks of unity there is a sense of discovery that all are kindred in Yahweh. In recognizing a common humanity in Yahweh there is a common cause; a common destiny; a common flourishing that can only happen when that sense of relatedness is discovered and lived out. The first Christian community in Acts manifests precisely this sort of relationship—and it is the work of the Spirit. Unity of the sort which allows this way of interaction is extraordinary; it is so counter intuitive that it can only be a sign of the reality and presence of the Holy Spirit. It is a unity that is possible only through the saving, transforming work of the Spirit in the lives of the believers. It is no accident that verse 33 about the power of the testimony to the resurrection and the great grace found among them comes in the middle of the description of the community’s generosity and care for one another. This is what the resurrection means in practice. In Luke’s description of this early church community it follows as inevitably as the day shall follow night that the life of the community is shaped, enabled and empowered by the Spirit who raised Jesus

from the dead. The Church is the community of the Spirit. The Spirit is the very life of God, whose power to give life is shown most clearly in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This community was an example of the dynamic power of God among believers. In short, the community's generosity itself becomes a tangible sign that authenticates its message of Jesus. The community is the embodied witness to the power found in relationship with Christ. It is true those early believers lived in expectation of Jesus' imminent return. Over two thousand years later, we no longer experience that same sense of urgency or of unconcern about the future. We feel that we must be concerned about securing our economic future with possessions. This is something that perhaps is necessary, but there is the possibility that there are other ways of fostering the unity those early believers had. There are ways to be a caring community without selling all that one has. Our sense of koinonia, loving and caring which overflows the boundaries of small groups and spreads outward, can be expressed by our willingness to see others through the view that we are all kindred because we are all children of God. Human beings are more like to gather in clusters of likeness. That seems to be inherent. Through the power of God's grace to us, we can be enabled to reach out to those who are different, to those who have hurt us, to those who are hostile to us and what we believe. Then our koinonia becomes a witness—a sign—of God's presence among us. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit may we be empowered to live that way.