

“FELLOWSHIP”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 15, 2017

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:9

“God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I want to share with you this morning a new understanding of “fellowship.” At least, it is new for me!

I thought it was interesting that on the Sunday when we have our pitch-in brunch, the second reading uses the word: “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I love fellowship, and I have always thought it is important. But I have always thought of it as mostly a matter of hanging around with people. Which is good in and of itself. But it is not all we have here, when we talk about Christian fellowship.

I don’t want to deny all other uses of the word fellowship. There are all sorts of fellowship: affiliations, societies, armies, soirees, clubs, and so on. Merchants nowadays always like to assert that you are joining a fellowship of sorts by buying something from them. I don’t mean to challenge all those other meanings. They are great. They’re just not at all like what Paul is referring to here in 1 Corinthians, the fellowship we enjoy in the Christian church.

The key point is that our fellowship is a joint ownership of something. It could as well be called a partnership, or “taking part,” or “condominium. We are bound to one another by something we own. Something we possess. Not something we earned, but something given to us as a gift. We all have something, the same thing, and so we are “in fellowship.” We are joint owners of the thing that makes us a community.

I also need to say that our fellowship is not something we all do. This is not the fellowship of people who all act similarly, who share the same culture or value the same values or walk the same. This fellowship, this joint ownership is the result of something that has been bestowed upon us. We have all been given title, together, to the thing that binds us.

In the church, we also do the other types of fellowship. When we go to Conner Prairie for a picnic and a concert, that is also fellowship. But like all our fellowship events it is merely one way we bring out into the open what is true deep inside all of us, that we are “joint owners” of something.

I first got onto this when I noticed that the Greek for “fellowship” in our passage is “*koinonia*.” Looking that up, I found that property is generally involved. People who “have” something “in common” have fellowship. I “take part”—notice how that sounds like I am getting something; and you also “take part.” We all get part of whatever this is, and thus become joint owners.

What is our fellowship in? And with whom do we have fellowship? Our fellowship is in our Lord, Jesus Christ. To us has been given, in John’s phrase, “power to become children of God . . . who were born of God.” That has been given to all who receive Jesus. So our joint ownership, the fundamental fellowship you and I have, is with a whole universe of people, who also own this the same thing we do, our Lord.

We don’t get to decide who is in this fellowship, because we didn’t found this club. We don’t decide the criteria for participation. We are one with all who are in Christ. This is a good thing to remember

when we are commemorating a date (1517) which is important for us Lutherans. "Lutheran fellowship" is not the basis for our joy, our peace, the forgiveness of our sins, our love of others. Nope. Our fellowship is in Christ. Have I said that enough times?

I am proud to say that my daughter-in-law Sarah is a part owner of the Green Bay Packers. But you and I and all who receive Christ become part owners of everything that belongs to Jesus Christ. There is a wonderful certificate of ownership in 1 Corinthians 3. The Christians in Corinth were forming their own associations and parties and affiliations, setting leaders over each. Paul decried this. He wrote:

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

"All things are yours"? That's what I call fellowship! "The world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God."

Fellowship = Joint ownership. Did I say that already?

And what a rich meaning *koinonia* has in the New Testament.

Worship is *koinonia*: Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, namely the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Service is *koinonia*: Hebrews 13:16 Do not neglect the doing good and the *koinonia* of what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Witness and outreach are *koinonia*: Philemon 1:6 I pray that the *koinonia* of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

There is *koinonia* in ministry: 2 Corinthians 8:4 begging us earnestly for the privilege of *koinonia* in this ministry to the saints.

And *koinonia* (fellowship or joint ownership) is so important a concept precisely because this joint ownership is contagious. Our share does not become less when we pass on a portion to others. There is more than enough of what we have to give to everyone in the world. And then some. Because it is a sharing in everything. The world is yours.

Watch how that happened in today's Gospel reading.

John the Baptist said "Look, the Lamb of God." And two of his disciples decided they liked that, so they went over and asked Jesus for a chance to visit. He said "Sure, come along." They even got one of their brothers and brought him and Jesus took him in, too."

It was casual, friendly, disorganized. And what it all boiled down to was brought to a head by Jesus, who asked them "What are you looking for?"

What are you looking for?

Freedom, peace, dignity, joy, understanding, patience, wealth, community? What answers these needs better than a share of the world through becoming a child of God?

Jesus said to them, "Come and see." And they did. The crowd got bigger and bigger, the fellowship got noisy and diverse, the boundaries were porous, but it was going in the right direction always, even when it got outside of Israel and leaped over the seas. A fellowship transcending every other, and bringing light to a world in darkness; peace to a world at war. You and I own it as truly as anyone else who is washed in the waters of baptism, and it is ours to share.

It is a fellowship we do not choose or deserve or direct. It belongs to our Lord. He is the one who makes us sit together, as it says in Ephesians 2: "He made us alive together, he raised us up together,

and he made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Enjoy.

Amen.

