

“Around the Bases: Κοινωνία”

“No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12).

Text: Responsive Reading, “Koinonia”¹

As we continue our journey “around the bases” using the Greek words for each “base,” we come this morning to “first base, which we usually call “FELLOWSHIP” or “CONNECT.” The Greek work for “fellowship” is “koinonia” (κοινωνία), which you may very well have heard before, since its transliterated form is used fairly often in Christian circles.

While “fellowship” has many meanings, the word is probably used most these days in the expression, “Christian fellowship”—so much so, in fact, that when someone uses the word “fellowship” in ordinary conversation, the odds are very high that this person is fairly involved in the life of the Church.² While our typical use of the word “fellowship” tends to refer to socializing, as at a church fellowship gathering, the word “fellowship” also connotes “to have in common,” “to be a party to,” “to partner in,” or “to belong equally to.”

These latter definitions come closer to what we’re talking about when we talk about “koinonia.” *Koinonia* has to do with our shared life in the Body of Christ, and it’s best seen in those passages in the New Testament where the phrases “one another” or “each other” appear. The eight verses we read together earlier are among literally dozens of such passages, and I imagine that you heard the over-arching theme of those verses as we read them, which is to **love one another**.

You may have noticed that, cell phones and social media notwithstanding, we live in an increasingly fragmented, individualistic, and isolated world. I’ve heard of more than one man who died alone in his apartment and his body remained undiscovered for two or three years because his income was deposited automatically and his bills were paid automatically. Because these men had no meaningful human relationships, and because their bills were up-to-date, nobody missed them at all.³

Such complete absence of koinonia stands in stark contrast to what koinonia actually looks like, and I’ve identified ten dimensions of what koinonia looks like in today’s texts. We’re going to look at each of those ten dimensions briefly, using a story to illustrate each one. These ten dimensions are just a few of the many we might choose:

1. **Be devoted to one another.** Perhaps the best-known example of devotion in the Bible is Ruth’s response to Naomi’s urging to return to her own home and her own people: *“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me”* (Ruth 1:16-17). That’s devotion.

Fifty years last October, as the desperate nature of the Cuban Missile Crisis began to be apparent, with nuclear missiles beginning to target American cities, Jackie Kennedy begged her husband not to send her away from Washington. “If anything happens,” she said, “we’re all

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on April 21, 2013.

² Perhaps the principal other use of the term in our time has to do with the position of being a fellow, as in a professional association or a university.

³ www.thelocal.se/32836/20110326/#.UXFb4bXvsrU

going to stay right here with you. I just want to be with you, and I want to die with you, and the children do, too—rather than live without you.”⁴ That’s devotion.

On March 31 of this year, during Louisville’s Elite Eight game against Duke, Kevin Ware suffered a gruesome compound fracture of his right leg. Perhaps you saw the event, as I did. The wound was so horrific that most of Kevin’s teammates turned away in horror. Some cried. Some threw up. It was really gruesome.

But there was one notable exception to this pattern. Teammate Luke Hancock went over to Kevin, held his hand, encouraged him, and said a prayer for him. Hancock later reported that “I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and prayed, ‘Lord, watch over us and let Kevin be okay during this tough time.’” That’s devotion.⁵

2. **Honor one another.** The Bible’s most familiar exhortation to honor is probably the fifth of the Ten Commandments, which tells us to “honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12). To honor someone means to treat him or her as precious and valuable. There are many ways to do that. Here’s one of my favorite stories that illustrates it:

Mike Royko once met a man named Slats Grobnik, who sold Christmas trees. Slats told Mike about a young couple who had come to him looking for a Christmas tree. The guy was tall and skinny, and she was kind of pretty, but both wore clothes from the bottom of the bin at the Salvation Army thrift store.

After seeing only trees that were too expensive, the couple finally found a Scotch pine that was okay on one side, but pretty bare on the other. Then they found another tree that wasn’t much better—full on one side, scraggly on the other. The man asked if \$3 would be okay, and Slats figured he wouldn’t be able to sell the trees otherwise, so he agreed.

A few days later Slats was walking down the street and saw a beautiful, well-rounded tree in the window of that couple’s apartment. He knocked on their door to see what had happened. The couple told him they’d matched the bare sides of the trees and then wired the trunks together. The branches overlapped and formed a tree so thick you couldn’t see the wire.

“And that’s the secret,” Slats told Mike. “You take two trees that aren’t perfect, that have flaws, that maybe nobody else would want; and if you put them together just right, you can come up with something really beautiful.”⁶ Leonardo da Vinci reportedly defined an arch as two weaknesses that, by leaning on each other, make a strength.⁷ Like those two trees, and like Leonardo’s arch, that’s what happens when we honor each other in the Body of Christ.

3. **Carry one another’s burdens.** There are many ways in which we carry one another’s burdens in the Body of Christ. Sometimes we literally carry things for each other in and out of this building and in other places. Sometimes we carry each other, as several of you did this week for Donna Townsend after she experienced a fender bender on Wednesday afternoon. Sometimes we carry each other’s burdens by praying for each other on the CBF PRAYER Line. Sometimes we just listen to each other, and that eases the load.

Our daughter, Anna, has had a fairly hard week this week. On one afternoon, she called to tell me about how hard the day was being physically for her. There wasn’t much I could do at this distance to ease that load, but as we said good-bye she commented, “Thanks for listening.

⁴ Janny Scott, “Tapes, Candid Talk by Young Kennedy Widow,” *New York Times*, 9-11-11.

⁵ www.sbnation.com/college-basketball/2013/4/9/4204168/ncaa-final-four-2013-luke-hancock-louisville-basketball-michigan

⁶ Mike Royko, *One More Time* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 85-87.

⁷ Quoted by Jane Rubietta in *Marriage Partnership*, vol. 12, no. 2.

I just needed someone to care.” One of the ways in which we carry one another’s burdens is by “the laying on of ears.”

4. **Be kind to one another.** It was 1967, and Doug Nicols was doing missions work in India. During that work, Doug contracted tuberculosis and had to stay in a sanitarium for several months.

In the TB sanitarium, Doug found himself in a lonely, confusing, and troubled place. He did not know the language of the other patients, but he wanted to share the Good News of Jesus with others. All Doug had in the sanitarium were a few gospel tracts in the local language, Parsee. He tried to pass them out, but nobody wanted them.

Then one night, Doug woke up at 2 a.m., coughing violently. During this coughing fit, Doug noticed a little old emaciated man across the aisle trying to get out of bed. The man was so weak that he couldn’t stand up. He began to whimper and tried again, but to no avail.

In the morning Doug realized by the awful smell that the man had been trying to get up to use the bathroom. The other patients were angry at the old man for not being able to contain himself. The nurse cleaned up the mess and then slapped the old man.

The next night, Doug again saw the old man trying to get out of bed, but this time Doug got out of bed and carried him to the toilet and then brought him back to his bed. The old man kissed Doug on the cheek and promptly went to sleep.

Early the next morning, Doug awoke to a steaming cup of tea beside his bed. Another patient had kindly made it for him. The patient motioned that he wanted one of those gospel tracts. The next two days, one after another patient asked, “Could I have one of those tracts too?”⁸ Be kind to one another. Kindness opens doors and hearts. It’s a good thing.

5. **Be compassionate with one another.** “Compassion” means “co-suffering,” and has to do with choosing to become involved where we don’t have to do it. Here’s a story about compassion:

Tim Winton is Australia’s most celebrated contemporary novelist, and his Christian faith is well-known. In the mid-60’s, Tim’s father was a policeman and was badly injured when a drunk driver hit his motorcycle. After weeks in a coma, Tim’s father returned home.

“He was sort of recognizable, but not really my dad,” Winton said in an interview. “He was all broken to pieces. They put him in a chair and said, ‘Here’s your dad.’ I was horrified.”

Winton’s father was a big man, and Mrs. Winton had great difficulty bathing him each day. There was nothing that Tim, five-years-old at the time, could do to help. News of the family’s situation got out into the local community, and shortly afterward, Winton recalls, his mother heard a knock at the door. “G’day. My name’s Len,” said a stranger to Mrs. Winton. “I heard your hubby’s a bit ill. Anything I can do?”

Len Thomas was from the church down the street. He had heard about the family’s difficulties and wanted to help. “He just showed up,” Winton said, “and he used to carry my dad from bed and put him in the bath, and he used to bathe him, which in the 1960s in Australia in the suburbs was not the sort of thing you saw every day.”

⁸ From Wayne Cordeiro, *Jesus: Pure and Simple* (Bethany House, 2012), pp. 59-60.

According to Winton, this simple act of kindness from one Christian man had a powerful effect: “It really touched me in that, watching a grown man bother, for nothing, to show up and wash a sick man—you know, it really affected me.” This “strangely sacrificial act,” as he described it, was the doorway into Christian faith for the entire Winton family.⁹

And, of course, we don’t have to look very far for the very same sort of kindness and compassion among ourselves. Sam Odulana’s care for Robert Wood was of this very same sort. And we thank God.

6. **Forgive one another.** One of my favorite stories of forgiveness is the story of Alvin and Lyle Straight. Alvin and Lyle were brothers, but they had had a falling out, and they hadn’t spoken for ten years.

In 1994, Alvin got word that Lyle had had a stroke, and he determined to seek reconciliation with his brother. Seventy-three year-old Alvin had lost his driver’s license because his eyesight had gone bad, and he was too proud to ask for a ride, so he decided to drive his 1966 John Deere riding lawn mower from his home in Laurens, Iowa to see Lyle in Mt. Zion, Wisconsin, a distance of 250 miles.

Camping out in fields and back yards for six weeks, Alvin moved steadily along at a whopping five miles an hour, finally coming to a run-down house on a dirt road outside Mt. Zion. Shuffling slowly toward the house, Alvin called out, “Lyle! Lyle!” There was no answer. New wrinkles came on Alvin’s face, as he wondered whether he had come too late.

Finally, a voice from within called out, “Alvin? Alvin?” Lyle came to the door, holding onto a walker. Lyle invited Alvin to sit with him on the porch, while he surveyed the lawn mower. With tears in his eyes, Lyle asked, “Alvin, you came all this way . . . on that . . . just to see me?”

Alvin smiled, and said through his own tears, “Yep.”¹⁰

Lyle’s question, “You came all this way . . . on that . . . just to see me?” reminds me of the words of an old Gospel song: “He left the splendor of heaven, knowing His destiny was the lonely hill of Golgotha, there to lay down His life for me.”¹¹ God doesn’t ask us to do what God hasn’t already done, and that’s a considerable part of the wonder of the Gospel. Forgive . . . as you have been forgiven.

7. **Teach one another.** There are many ways to teach, but the one to which I’ve found myself drawn this week is the familiar poem by Edgar Guest:

I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I’d rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye’s a better pupil, more willing than the ear;
Fine counsel is confusing, but example’s always clear.
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.

I can soon learn how to do it if you’ll let me see it done;
I can watch your hand in action, but your tongue too fast may run.
And the lectures you deliver may be very wise and true,
But I’d rather get my lesson by observing what you do.

⁹ John Dickson, *The Best-Kept Secret of Christian Mission* (Zondervan, 2010), pp. 97-98/

¹⁰ *The Straight Story* (a true story; Disney, 1999), rated G, written by John Roach II and Mary Sweeney, directed by David Lynch.

¹¹ “If That Isn’t Love,” words and music by Dottie Rambo.

For I may misunderstand you and the high advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.

When I see a deed of kindness, I am eager to be kind.
When a weaker brother stumbles, and a strong man stands behind
Just to see if he can help him, then the wish grows strong in me
To become as big and thoughtful as I know that friend to be.
And all travelers can witness that the best of guides today
Is not the one who tells them, but the one who shows the way.

We teach by “walking the walk” much more than by “talking the talk”; but talking is sometimes needed, and that's the next thing

8. **Admonish one another.** To admonish is to express warning or disapproval, especially in a gentle and earnest way that demonstrates genuine care for the person spoken to. The context for Paul's exhortation to “*carry each other's burdens*” is actually a word of admonition: “*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*” (Galatians 6:1-2).

Most of us don't like to be admonished, exhorted, rebuked, or corrected; and yet there is not one among us who doesn't need such expressions of care from time to time. And most of us don't enjoy delivering admonishment or correction, either, though genuine care sometimes requires it.

It was a gentle word of admonition that my Nigerian student, Duro Ayanrinola, shared with me after class one day that literally transformed the direction of significant portions of my life. (Duro is now the General Secretary of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist World Alliance Regional Secretary for Africa.)

If you or I haven't received any words of admonition lately, I doubt that this is because we haven't needed it. More likely, we don't give evidence of having a teachable spirit, and those who are able to offer admonition to us have decided that such instruction would fall on deaf ears.

9. **Encourage each other.** I expect that you saw the movie, *Blindside*, the true story of the early life of Michael Oher, who plays offensive tackle for the world champion Baltimore Ravens. Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, the real-life couple who adopted him, tell another gripping story in their book, *In a Heartbeat*:¹²

“There is a little-known congressional program that awards internships to young people who have aged out of the foster care system. These are kids who were never adopted, and are no longer eligible for state support.

“[A senator we've met] employed one such man as an intern. One morning the senator breezed in for a meeting and discovered that his intern was already in the office, reorganizing the entire mailroom. The senator said to the intern, ‘This is amazing—the mailroom has never looked so clean. You did a great job.’

“A few minutes later the senator saw that the intern had tears streaming down his face. [He] said, ‘Son, are you okay?’

“‘Yes, sir,’ the intern answered quietly.

¹² Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, *In a Heartbeat: Sharing the Power of Cheerful Giving* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2011).

“ ‘Did I say something to offend you?’

“ ‘No, sir.’

“ ‘Well, what’s wrong?’

“The young man said, ‘That’s the first time in my life anyone’s told me that I did something good.’”¹³ Encouragement doesn’t cost much, and it goes a long, long way.

10. **Build each other up.** The Bible says, “*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but **only what is helpful for building others up** according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*” (Ephesians 4:29).

Edvard Grieg, the nineteenth century Norwegian composer whose music I often listened to as a child, wrote his parents concerning the encouragement he received from famous Hungarian composer-pianist Franz Liszt, who had just played Grieg’s *Piano Concerto in A Minor*. Here’s what Grieg wrote:

“Finally, as he handed me the score, he said, ‘Hold to your course. Let me tell you, you have the talent for it, and—don’t get scared off!’ This last is of infinite importance to me. It is almost what I will call a sacred mandate. Time and again when disappointments and bitterness come I shall think of his words, and the memory of this hour will have a wonderful power to sustain me in days of adversity; that is my confident hope.”¹⁴

My friends, “*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us*” (1 John 4:12).

1. Be devoted to one another.
2. Honor one another.
3. Carry each other’s burdens.
4. Be kind to one another.
5. Be compassionate to one another.
6. Forgive each other.
7. Teach one another.
8. Admonish one another.
9. Encourage one another.
10. Build each other up.

Such is the Way of Koinonia in the Body of Christ. We are a community composed of those persons who witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God, who embody the life of that Kingdom in our daily lives, and who continually seek to enlarge the compass of that Kingdom in the world.

¹³ Quoted in *Men of Integrity*, “How Little It Takes” (November/December 2010).

¹⁴ *Ravinia* (August, 2008), 160.

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Reader One: *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”* (John 13:34-35).

Reader Two: “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10).

Reader One: *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law”* (Romans 13:8).

Reader Two: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Reader One: *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”* (Ephesians 4:32).

Reader Two: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Colossians 3:16).

Reader One: *“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing”* (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Reader Two: “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12).

Reader One: The Word of God for the People of God!

People: Thanks be to God!

Love one another:

1. Be devoted to one another.
2. Honor one another.
3. Carry each other’s burdens.
4. Be kind to one another.
5. Be compassionate to one another.
6. Forgive each other.
7. Teach one another.
8. Admonish one another.
9. Encourage one another.
10. Build each other up.