

**“Discovering Authentic Community”**  
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)  
*Fourth in a series about Discipleship Practices*

Acts 2.36-47; Matthew 4.17-23

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That was Pentecost, about seven weeks after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It was another mighty act of God. What was most remarkable about it? Was it this bunch of defeated disciples, now sprung by God into the world? Was it that diverse crowd from so many places, each hearing about Jesus' victory in their own language, from those who did not speak their language? Was it so many who opposed Jesus, now turning and giving their lives to him?

Each of these was astonishing. Yet what was most remarkable, unexpected, and enduring might have been what happened next. They became a community. A community of devotion and life together. A community of wonder and worship. A community of radical sharing and generosity. A diverse community. A growing community. A community made by the Holy Spirit. The community of Jesus Christ. Jesus' authentic community. Our community.

II

In their book, *Bullseye: Aiming to Follow Jesus*, Debbie Johnson and Jamie Holtom talk about things Jesus' followers do.<sup>1</sup> They focus on 6 core activities. These root us and shape us as Jesus' disciples. As we are rooted and shaped, we can go and do many other things with him.

These 6 activities are:

*Using Spiritual Practices*  
*Worshipping Together Weekly*  
*Discovering Authentic Community*  
*Serving with Our Gifts*  
*Giving Generously*  
*Sharing Christ*

Picture these as bullseyes. A bullseye gives us a target to aim for. We won't always hit it. Still, we keep coming back to the target and trying again.

We have already dug into the first two activities – *Using Spiritual Practices* and *Worshipping Together Weekly*. Today is the third: *Discovering Authentic Community*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jamie Holtom and Debbie Johnson, *Bullseye: Aiming to Follow Jesus* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2015)

### III

Jamie and Debbie write this: *“Authentic Community is central to the Christian life.”*<sup>2</sup>

The Christian life is about following Jesus. By Holy Spirit, we are with Jesus, learning from him. He makes us more and more like him. We become alive in the joy of the Good News: who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

We cannot do this alone. We can only follow Jesus with others. I can only be a Jesus person as part of Jesus’ people.

Once, a fellow was visiting some friends. They were part of the same congregation, but the friends had drifted away. That was no problem, they said. They could still follow Jesus.

The visitor said nothing. He just leaned forward toward the fireplace. With tongs, he took two coals from the fire, and placed them on the stone hearth. He sat quietly, watching. While the fire continued to blaze, the 2 coals quickly went out. In the fire, with other coals, they had burned hot and bright. On their own, the energy left them and they cooled.<sup>3</sup> The friends were watching too. They understood.

### IV

I need you. Without you, I can’t walk with Jesus. We need to walk together.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer led an underground seminary, outlawed by the Nazi regime in Germany. After the Gestapo shut it down, he wrote what he learned from the experience in a book called Life Together.

This is one thing he realized:

*the nearness of a fellow Christian [is] a physical sign of the gracious presence of [God the Trinity].*<sup>4</sup>

I need you to show me God, because sometimes I’m not seeing very well.

Many of you showed me God a few weeks ago, when you came and helped us move things out of our basement while water was streaming in. It was not the worst thing to ever happen, but we were feeling, well, swamped. God used you to say, “You are not alone in this.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>3</sup> The visitor was D. L. Moody, an American preacher in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Holtom and Johnson, 59.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, Prayerbook of the Bible, translated by James H. Burtness, edited by Gerhard Ludwig Müller et al (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 29.

A small group from our congregation regularly visits people who are homebound or in nursing homes. They are physical signs to our sisters and brothers that they are not alone, that they belong to God who is always with them.

We need each other to speak Jesus words to us. When we're "up here," thinking too much of ourselves and getting off-track, we need someone to come alongside and speak Jesus' words of kind-correction. When we're "down here," feeling empty, torn up, hopeless, or guilt-ridden, we need someone to come alongside and speak Jesus' words of forgiveness, healing, and hope. We might already know those words. Still, there is more power in someone else saying them.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

*Christians need other Christians who speak God's Word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves. . . .*<sup>5</sup>

Authentic community.

V

I want to leave you with 4 things to aim for, practices you can do to help all of us together hit that target, *Discover Authentic Community*.

**Look for opportunities.** There might be someone in our congregation whom you've talked with a few times. How can you deepen your community together? Grab a coffee? Lunch? Go for a walk? Learn about each other. Build trust.

**Create connecting events.** Community often forms through events and activities. Look in your Sunday News and see what is going on. How can you get involved? If there is not something that fits you, then what can you start? Ryan and Amy Weaver just started inviting people over for a pot luck dinner every Friday night. A simple idea. What are your ideas?

**Act with Love.** We fall into some nasty habits. Gossip. Talking unkindly about others. Being bothered by something (which is fine), but instead of finding out why it is or what can be done about it, griping about it. None of these fit with following Jesus. Can we act with love for each other? With kindness, and patience, and generosity? We all need it.

**Receive the community Jesus gives.** Bonhoeffer worried about people having "ideal" dreams of Christian community. He wrote:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 32.

*Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community, even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.<sup>6</sup>*

Our church community together is not ideal. We try to make it better. The Holy Spirit is always forming and reforming it. But it will never be whatever the “ideal church” is.

It is better than that. It is real. It is the community Jesus is giving us.

Again, Bonhoeffer:

*Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.*

A gift. God's gift!

Authentic community. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 36.