

"A Community Flipped Around"

Ninth in a series on Peter's First Letter

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

1st Peter 3:8-12

July 4, 2021

The goal of this is for you all to have common thinking, the same passion together, a sibling-love, a from-the-gut feeling for each other, and humbleness of mind.

Don't repay evil for evil, or insult for insult. Instead, give back a blessing. This is what you were called to, so that you may inherit a blessing.

*For the one who wants to love life and see good days
should guard the tongue from evil,
and the lips from speaking deceit;
should turn away from evil and do good;
should seek peace, and follow after it.
For the Lord's eyes are upon the those who are just,
and his ears are open to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*

My translation, using N. T. Wright's *Kingdom New Testament* and various commentaries.

When I visited Australia, I learned to drive.

I already knew how. Much was the same. Accelerate and brake, steer and shoulder check, keep with traffic, watch for wildlife, and so on.

Except it's all flipped. They drive on the left side, not the right. So making a turn, especially at a many-lane intersection, was an experience of multi-spatial imagination, and nerves.

The car is flipped too. The driver is on the right, which feels wrong. I'd reach to shift gears, and find the door handle. I'd signal my turn, and the wipers started. Thankfully the brake and gas were the same. Otherwise, disaster!

It's like Christian community, compared with other communities. It's flipped.

II

Peter writes his letter to some second-generation Christian communities. He is helping them be Jesus's people in their particular places. Especially how to be community together.

Our challenges are different from theirs. Still, his wisdom for them says something to us. What is our church-community, when it belongs to Jesus?

In our culture, for a long time, the ways people get together, or don't, have been changing. Ways folks used to share life are eroding or altering. It's disorienting. Newer ways of community are emerging. Some are really good. Still, many among us experience disconnection and isolation.

Then came Covid.

Think of our church-congregation-community life. We have not really been able to be together. We've found some ways, like these Sunday times. These are good, but far from ideal, and many are left out. Now, we're starting to imagine being together again. How will it go? What will it be like? How will it work? Who will belong? What will we have learned? Gained? Lost?

I think we'll be disoriented. It might be a bit like driving in Australia.

III

Actually, I think church-community is a lot like driving in Australia. In so many ways, it is the same as other communities. Driving is driving; community is community. Still, compared to the other ones we know, this Jesus-community is flipped.

Like other communities, it's not ideal. Peter hints at this, bluntly. *"Don't repay evil for evil, or insult for insult."* Yes, church! Even within our fine fellowships, insults are flung and evil gets done. Not always. Hopefully rarely. Still, sometimes. Too often. Does this disillusion you? Good.

I've talked about Dietrich Bonhoeffer before. He was a German professor and pastor, during the Nazi years. For a while he led a small community learning to be ministers. They lived an intense life together, like a monastery. It was illegal. Eventually the Gestapo shut it down.

Later, thinking about this experience, Bonhoeffer warned of the dangers of having an

ideal of what Christian community *should be like*. He wrote:

*On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image.*¹

Also,

*Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community.*²

You see, compared to an ideal community, the real community, which actually exists, can never measure up. Our ideal is imaginary. It's the real one that God gives us.

Bonhoeffer again:

*Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality.*³

We do not make our Jesus-community happen. God does. It's God's gift. Yes, the real one!

So as we start coming back together physically, be careful. We might have high hopes for what it will be like. Don't let our hopes, however, keep us from seeing what God is actually going to be giving us. It might not be what we expect. It might be disorienting, like driving in Australia. We might even be disappointed. But it will be God's gift. So it will be good.

IV

Let's dig out something else from Peter's teaching. He begins this bit with 5 things that characterize our community formed by Christ.

First, we have a common thinking. No, we don't think the same about everything. We're not a Star Trek Borg collective, a "hive mind." Differing perspectives, outlooks, and ideas, discussing and debating these things . . . that's all healthy.

So what is our common thinking? Our thinking is transformed, shaped, and directed by

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich., Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 5
Translated by Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004) 35.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

the same source. How we understand things, how we see ourselves and others, our world, and especially God, is Jesus-shaped.⁴ Jesus's thinking is ours.⁵

Peter says we have a common love. I don't think he is talking about our love for each other, not yet. Rather, our love points the same direction, to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us to love God with our whole selves.⁶

With all the diversity that Jesus brings together in his community, around the world, it's our common love for God that holds us together. Our unity is Jesus: our common love for God in him, our common way of thinking like him.⁷

From this comes our love for each other. It's a sibling-love, a family-love. It's not that we love each other *as if* we were sisters and brothers, *imagining* that we belong to the same family. We do! We are! Jesus has brought us together. You and I have been adopted by the Spirit into God's chosen family.⁸ This is real.⁹

Think about siblings. You love your sister or brother. Why? You might not have common interests. You might be quite different. If you weren't related, you might not be friends. Maybe you don't get along wonderfully well. Still, you love. It is a bond that goes beyond your feelings. In Jesus' community, we love each other because we are family.

We deeply affect each other. The Greek word here gets translated as "compassionate" or "tender-hearted." Literally, it means a feeling in our guts. I like that. What happens to you gets to me deep in myself. It's like, when you have a great meal, I feel full. When my stomach is empty with hunger, your belly aches.

⁴ Douglas Harink calls this a "shared intelligence." He says, "... to be likeminded is not to say that the people of God constitutes itself *on the basis of* its common agreements; it is rather to say that it is constituted *from beyond itself* by the one to whom these commonly shared 'divine things' truthfully testify as to the gifts of the Holy Spirit." 1 & 2 Peter, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos, 2009), 90.

⁵ In another New Testament letter, the apostle Paul wrote: "... *complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus...*" (Philippians 2:2-5)

⁶ Mark 12:28.

⁷ Harink, 89f.

⁸ See for example Romans 8:14-16; Galatians 4:4-6; Ephesians 1:4-6.

⁹ Ours is "an objective kinship." Harink, 91.

Within Jesus' community, one's joy delights all of us. One's sorrow pains all of us. One's needs move all of us.

Lastly, a 5th thing that characterizes our community formed by Christ: we are humble-minded.

In Peter's society, humbleness was not good. People who lacked social power were humble. It was weakness. It was shame, dishonour.¹⁰ Too often, our world is not so different.

But when our thinking is Jesus' shaped, when our love is God-focused, when we share a sibling love within this family, when we are deeply moved by one another . . . we act like Jesus. Jesus, God-Almighty, humbled himself to become a servant. We humble ourselves to serve each another. We who have more power lower ourselves to raise us who have less.

V

We are weird.

We are a community, like so many others. Because of Jesus, however, the most important stuff is flipped.

- Even when we disagree, we are thinking together, because Jesus is shaping our minds in common.
- Our love is focused, not within our community, but beyond it to the Divine Community who is God the Trinity.
- We don't decide to belong together. God makes us family, siblings sharing love.
- We deeply affect each other.
- All of us serve all of us.

And we do all of this *most certainly and consistently imperfectly*.

Our Christ-community together is not ideal.

It's better. It's real. And that flips everything around. Thanks be to God.

¹⁰ "In the highly competitive and stratified world of Greco-Roman antiquity, only those of degraded social status were 'humble,' and humility was regarded as a sign of weakness and shame, an inability to defend one's honor." Dennis R. Edwards, 1 Peter, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2017), 142.