

FELLOWSHIP OF WONDER

Matthew 17:1-8 (NASB)

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3 April 2017

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How often Christian community goes awry! How often the genuine spiritual needs of the human heart are not met! How often we leave the gathering of Christians wondering: *Is this really Christian community? If not, where can I find it?*

If we are going to find it we need to know what it is. What are the distinctive features of Christian community which makes it different from all other human groupings? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following in *Life Together*:

Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. This is true not merely at the beginning, as though in the course of time something else were to be added to our community; it remains so for all the future and to all eternity. I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us (pp. 24-25, New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

So if the reality of Jesus is the central binding and shaping reality of Christian community, what is it like for us to be around him? Matthew recorded a pivotal event in the discipling of Peter, James and John where Jesus gave them the answer to this question:

“Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!’ When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, ‘Get up, and do not be afraid’” (Matthew 17:1-7).

These disciples were granted, as a group, an overpowering personal experience of Jesus Christ. Their experience allows us to venture a definition: Christian community is the fellowship of those who have been overwhelmed by the wonder of God’s glory. Wonder is our reaction, glory is the thing to which we react. If we mistake or forget this central reality of Christian community, everything related to it will be off and fake. Matthew gives us eight defining features of this fellowship of wonder:

JESUS INVITES US ALL TO THE WONDER

He wrote: **“Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves”** (Matthew 17:1). Christ was intensely aware that the leaders of his church had no personal awareness of his true identity. They would have been familiar with the teaching about Messiah in the Law and the Prophets. They had already seen an array of unthinkable miracles and heard him teach with the voice of divine authority. But the impact of sin on the human mind is devastating. He must have thought that something needed to be done to break what Paul the Apostle called the futility of their minds. And so he invited them to a transforming experience. In fact, he invites every believer to know him as he truly is: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace.

THE WONDER OF GOD’S GLORY IS A CONFRONTATION

Matthew explained what happened to Peter, James, and John: **“And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light”** (Matthew 17:2). Do we understand to what we have been invited? God’s glory is the outshining radiance of his manifest perfections. Yes, our attention is partly upon the other human beings in the fellowship, but God’s agenda is for us to have a confrontation with his glory.

The Lord gave John the Apostle a second direct experience of his glory late in his life which he recorded in the Book of Revelation: **“Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength”** (Revelation 1:12-16).

A confrontation with the glory of Christ cannot help but make an impact on us personally. Frederica Mathews-Greene, a writer and commentator for National Public Radio, tells the story of her personal collision with the reality of Christ. She had been raised as a Roman Catholic but became radicalized to gender feminism when she was in college. She was known to verbally demolish any foolish Christian who tried to share the message of Christ with her.

Frederica went on a trip to Great Britain with her boyfriend, Greg. They were visiting a great cathedral in Dublin, Ireland. Though she was a staunch disbeliever, she appreciated the art for its own sake. At one point the two ended up walking different ways down the cool marble aisles. Frederica stopped at a beautiful statue of Christ in an alcove. In a moment where it seemed like time itself had been suspended, Frederica found her soul being overwhelmingly impacted, not only by the loving depiction of Christ intended by the artist, but by the reality of the very person of the Son of God, Christ Jesus, Lord of All, and Savior of the World.

Her impression was that Christ was revealing himself to her personally in that moment. She sensed the immensity of his love for mankind. She says she heard him say something very specific: “I

am your life.” Frederica did not even realize until afterward that she had knelt—not before a statue, which had never made any impact on her before—but before the Lord himself. She says: “When I stood up, I was a Christian.” [Frederica’s full story can be found in the February 2017 NED Connection.]

When people with that awareness of the reality of Christ gather, a fellowship of wonder is formed, focused unerringly on the attributes of God and the work of Christ. Jesus spoke the following in the context of church discipline, but this saying applies widely to all true gatherings of believers: **“For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst”** (Matthew 18:20). And where Christ is present, his glory is present. This, and nothing else, is normal Christian community. The reverse is also true. If there is no glory there can be no genuine Christian community.

This is a crucial diagnostic of our participation in the fellowship: Are we connecting with others solely on the basis of the wonders of Christ, or are we importing a slew of private motivations? This is a harsh light to shine upon our souls, for we all have secondary motivations. But unless we fight for the real Christ-centered blessing, we will for all time be doomed to disappointment in Christian fellowship. We will walk away unsatisfied, and probably unaware that we have—for the most part--done it to ourselves.

WE JOIN OTHERS WHO ARE ALREADY IN THE WONDER

As this experience unfolded for the disciples they discovered that there were already others in the fellowship of wonder. Matthew wrote: **“And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him”** (Matthew 17:3). The destiny of every believer was visible before them: eternal life in the presence of the glory of God. But the first installment of that destiny was already in the possession of the disciples. They were already living in fellowship together with the perfect man who was also the perfect representation of the Godhead. And so are we!

It is crucial that we diagram this fellowship correctly. The diagram of our fellowship is not a circle of chairs facing one another with Christ seated in one of the chairs. In that pattern we might find ourselves looking at Christ one moment or a fellow-believer at another moment. The logic of such a pattern is that the normal humans would absorb most of our attention. We would be most likely to think about them all the time rather than Christ.

The true diagram of the fellowship of wonder is that our attention is naturally overmastered by the magnificence of Christ in his manifold perfections. In this plan of fellowship, we are standing shoulder to shoulder in a tight bunch, all facing our Lord. He absorbs our contemplation. We do, in fact, see one another, but only in our peripheral vision. The other believers are not the focus of our meditation all the day long and through the night. He is! And one more thing about the true diagram of the fellowship of wonder: it is dynamic. Christ is moving all the time, and we are actively following him wherever he goes. While we are aware of one another as members of the same traveling band, we have no time to perseverate on the weaknesses and failings of others like us.

As mere humans we are shallow and tiresome. Christ is deeper and wider than anyone we have ever known, and infinitely fascinating. Why would we ever set up chairs in a circle and stare at one another? Every decision we make about our churches will be affected by the conception of Christian community which is in our heads. And it is frighteningly easy to default to the wrong thing.

THE WONDER AWAKENS OUR HUNGER FOR THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Matthew then revealed the character of the fellowship of wonder through the words of Peter: **“Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah’”** (Matthew 17:4). The word Peter used for “good” was *kalos*, which means good, beautiful, healthy, sound, and fit (Friberg, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*). It is, in short, wonderful!

If we assemble the three accounts of this event in the Gospels we see that the character of this meeting was so strong that it affected the disciples in a mixture of ways. This goodness of God—his glory—was so intense that Peter and the others were terrified. Luke said that they went stupid. But Peter, at least, was not confused about one thing. Fellowship with Christ in the presence of his people is so incredibly sweet that he wanted more of it: “Lord, this is good--let’s just stay here!” This experience of God’s goodness awakened a hunger in the human soul because our Creator designed it into us from the beginning.

Paul wrote that when the body of believers is worshiping in a true awareness of God’s glory, in spirit and truth, people entering that environment will say: **“Surely God is among you!”** This is one of the crucial ways God gives testimony of his reality to fallen humans, and to regenerate ones as well. The Psalmist wrote: **“O taste and see that the Lord is good!”** (Psalm 34:8a). Genuine Christian community, because it is imbued with the goodness of God, leaves an appropriately good taste in our mouths.

This is experiential. Yet it does not replace the word of God. It confirms it in the strongest possible way. So when our fellowship stinks we are undermining the veracity of God’s word: “Come fellowship with us! We will focus on your human faults the same way we focus on our own.” Who wants that? No one. But when the word of God is faithfully presented in the fellowship of wonder it is experienced the way God intended and speaks most powerfully. The Psalmist wrote: **“...The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. /They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; /Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb”** (Psalm 19:9b-10). The taste of the goodness of God is so wonderful that we hunger for more.

GOD SPEAKS TO US IN THE WONDER

Matthew then tells us that God spoke into that gathering: **“While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!’”** (Matthew 17:5). In another Gospel God adds: **“My Chosen One.”**

If we are thinking clearly as we read these words, our minds should be blown by the profound ways that the second person of the holy Trinity is described. Christ is eternally the Beloved of the Father, he is eternally the Son of the Father, he is eternally the Chosen One. The Father is eternally well-pleased with him. Christ’s lordship is revealed by the command which follows these descriptions: **“...Listen to Him!”**

We are slapped in the face with what has often been called the first two facts of the Universe. First, there is a God. Second, we are not him. Obedience which reaches deep into the central core of our beings is the only sensible way to respond. Our eternity depends on it. This is not: “Do not remove the tag from this pillow.” This is: “Step off the train track because a train is coming.” It is a matter of life and death.

Every Christian community is a means appointed by God for his voice to be heard in specific words. The formal preaching and teaching of the written word as delivered by pastors and elders are the core of it. Let us not depreciate these! There is a necessary movement today to recover person-to-person discipleship. But while we are doing that, let us not fail to notice that the Church of Christ began as a large group meeting on the Day of Pentecost, then it moved to smaller groups as they met house to house in addition to the meetings in the Temple.

God’s words on the Mount of Transfiguration go very specifically to what we in the Alliance call the crisis of sanctification. Will you and I **“Listen to Him!”** in all things or will we pick and choose what we will obey and what we will not? Christian community is the fellowship of the surrendered. This is a sweet, peaceful thing--to be among those who are no longer fighting with God.

WORSHIP IS THE CENTRAL ACTIVITY OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF WONDER

That surrender is part and parcel of the true worship which is the central activity of the fellowship of wonder. Matthew wrote: **“When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified”** (Matthew 17:6). We must be careful to understand that when they fell down, it was because they chose to do so as an act of worship. Yes, they were overwhelmed, but responding to God with their entire persons—body, soul, mind, and spirit—was normal for them.

So Ezekiel wrote: **“Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. ...There was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking”** (Ezek. 1:1, 26b-28).

A holy fear is part of this, along with the joy and blessing. But one of the worst things that can be said about any person is that they do not fear the Lord. Abraham fell before God, Moses fell, Ezekiel fell, Daniel fell, John fell, the twenty-four elders in heaven fall, and all holy angels fall in worship. So I ask you: Who are we to not fall? I do not say that you must flop on the ground. Do that if it is honest for you. But abandonment to worship in the deepest part of the human heart is the right response to the wonder and glory of our God.

If worship is the central activity of Christian community that means that merely human fellowship is not. It is not possible to have true fellowship with other believers if we are not

approaching one another with worship toward God in our hearts. This also means that mission is not first, even though it is at the core. There can be no true missionality in a community without the priority of worship. Perhaps we might say that because the glory of God is the central principle of all that God does, worship is the central principle of everything a Christian community does.

JESUS TOUCHES US PERSONALLY IN THE WONDER

Matthew then tells us that when the three disciples who went with Jesus up the mountain were on the ground in fear and worship, Jesus went to them and touched them: **“And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, ‘Get up, and do not be afraid’”** (Matthew 17:7).

God can touch us personally at any time, but he has chosen to work in and through the community of those he is redeeming. So come to the fellowship with expectation that God will work and you will be touched. You will be changed! A very specific kind of touch is shown here. The writer to the Hebrews said that the Devil keeps the whole human race in bondage through the fear of death. Fear and bondage are key ministries for him! And Jesus, by touching James, Peter, and John shows us that driving out fear and setting people free are key ministries for him: **“Do not be afraid.”**

He wants to touch you and me in this way, to speak peace to our hearts. It was for freedom that Christ set us free, and freedom from fear is central to that experience of our Lord. So receive it! Come to the fellowship of wonder, and discover that Christ is setting you free.

WE CARRY THE WONDER OUT INTO THE LIGHT OF COMMON DAY

Finally, Matthew showed us the three disciples taking their experience of the fellowship of wonder and walking out into the light of common day with it: **“And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, ‘Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead’”** (Matthew 17:8-9). As we walk out of the fellowship of wonder and back into our normal lives, it is there that we become God’s agents to invite others to the wonder. The three disciples were asked to withhold speaking of this until after the resurrection. That time has now come.

So don’t hold back! Sharing about the goodness of God is one of the easiest ways to share our faith. Luke records Jesus declaring to his disciples following the resurrection: **“You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”** (Luke 24:48-49). We are like earthen vessels with the present experience of God shining in our hearts. We walk about as lights in a darkened world, joyful and peaceful.

When we live our Christian community as a fellowship of wonder, we will find it easy to say: “Come and see how good God is!” And everything we do in that fellowship takes its shape and purpose from the glory of God. Christ brought three key leaders among his disciples up a mountain to say: “Come up here with me. I need to show you something.” And there they learned of his glory and the wonder of knowing it personally. Our Lord wants to do the same thing with each of us and each of our Christian communities. Will you go?

[NED District Conference, 4.3.17]