

## **Come As You Are** by Shelly Berryhill

*"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!"  
Psalm 133:1*

***They're not formal, they're not perfect, and they don't have to be. This group enjoys simply coming together into God's presence.***

The Saturday night buzz was on! Bits of several conversations could be heard from the quiet of the bedroom...one full of news upon arrival from Europe, one exhausted from a day spent putting together her portfolio, one recovering from a less than pleasant visit with parents, one working at that somewhat awkward initial conversation with a newcomer and one bursting out in disbelief as she opens the front door to see a familiar old face. Let church begin! The bread is broken, the meal eaten. Only a few stragglers miss dessert.

The group gathers in the family room in every corner and cranny, some sitting, some lying, a few choosing to stand, at first. A prayer is offered, a song strummed on the guitar. We are called to peace, to quiet, to attentiveness to God. Worship begins for the church of tattered t-shirts and faded jeans. Many exhale the day's woes. God is calling...will each one answer? Several songs and a few prayers later, one shifts in position and begins to tell the story of his life, beginning with birth and recalling several highlights and lowlights. He shares so openly, from his heart...telling his very own story. Other than the use of modern language, we might easily think this brother's story was from the Bible. He shares his first encounter with Jesus, the saints who invested their lives into his, the first time he turned his back on God. He shares how he learned to hear the voice of God, how much more detailed his prayers have become with age, the journey of events that led him to live his calling and what the word "surrender" has come to mean. Through tears, he tells of his 20-something struggle with pornography, how he conquered it for a while but now is in the death grip of the addiction again. While his head hangs in shame and fear, the tattered and faded gather 'round him... each reaching out with a touch of assurance, each bowing low in humility as they carry their brother to the Father asking for His healing hand. God called and all did answer.

**"Community is nothing more than life together; it is also nothing less than life together."**

If there were one word to sum up the entirety of the Psalmist's words in chapter 133, that word would be community. It is a commodity that most every human seeks...a place of identity, security, encouragement...a place of true belonging. We all want it at some level; we all search for it from time to time. Some of us search with a vigor and energy, looking most anywhere we see something that might only vaguely resemble true community. Some of us are so weary from the

daily grind that we pull ourselves into a place or two where we believe community might find us.

Community is nothing more than life together; it is also nothing less than life together. To live together, to tread through the commonness of life with others, to encourage and champion, to walk alongside, to carry another down a bumpy road, to share values and beliefs and faith, to be my brother's keeper – these are the rare treasures and weighty burdens of life together.... community. The one who enters into living community finds indescribable joy and enormous strength that is fueled only by the living presence of Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that this kind of “daily fellowship of life with other Christians” is an “unspeakable gift of God”! He writes, in his book *Life Together*, “It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us...”.

Even as “God is the giver of all good gifts” (James 1:17), we are the keepers, the sowers, those who are called to be faithful with the gifts He's bestowed. Living community, one that finds it's origin, passion and life in Jesus Christ, is a gift to be cultivated and grown, pruned and deepened. One verse in the 2nd chapter of Acts highlights the how-to's that the early church embarked on. “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (v.42) Community is held together by devotion/commitment to God and to each other. Community is grown and strengthened by spending time with one another and by having meals together, even as our godly ancestors modeled. Community is deepened through the power of narration and the courage to share.

Devotion, commitment, time and meals together are all words we've heard and are familiar with. What in world is meant by the “power of narration”? In Deuteronomy 6:7-8 it is written of God's words, “You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.” God wanted the commandments, the judgements, the instructions and the numerous stories of His faithfulness and provisions for His people to be told. So many times in the New Testament, Jesus Himself chose simple stories to teach with - parables, they were called. People who heard these stories were often changed from the inside out. There is power in the lost art of storytelling.

**"What a tragedy to spend time together but never enter into life together!"**

Living community is deepened immensely when the brethren gather and share their stories. The sharing is real, raw, uncensored and straight from the heart. Can you imagine the connection that is made when the hand finds out it's a toe that's sitting next to it? Can you imagine the precision of function that occurs

when several parts of the Body welcome another new part and learn of that part's strengths and weaknesses? Can you imagine the powerful prayers that can be offered from a group of Believers who are truly family to each other? What a gift when God adds to our number another child of His! What a tragedy to spend time together but never enter into life together! It is time for us to strip away all pride and fear; time to do away with plans and agendas. An integral part of building real church is sharing our very own God stories. Stories of how He has broken us, molded us, exposed us, loved us.

In closing, Bonhoeffer says of sharing our real selves over our ideal selves, "Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together – the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship". So be it!

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