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## *Philemon*

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 8, 2019

Anyone excited for Kickoff Sunday in the NFL today?

Well, I have good news and bad news for you.

The bad news is that although today's homily begins with something that *is* televised on ESPN, it isn't football, and it probably isn't even remotely considered a sport by anyone, perhaps especially those of us that just raised our hands. But the good news is that it does feature highly skilled and well-trained individuals competing against one another.

So, any fans of the Scripps National Spelling Bee?  
Anybody know the winning word from this year's Bee?

Trick question...for the first time in history, there was not one, but 8 national co-champions of the 2019 National Bee.<sup>1</sup>

What about last year? Anyone remember 2018's winning word?

Koinonia. K-O-I-N-O-N-I-A. Koinonia.

Last year, after over 500 youth from across the nation took the stage to spell words that most of use can't even pronounce properly, the last one standing was a 14-year old Texan rookie named Karthik Nemmani.<sup>2</sup> He barely blinked when confronted with words such as “Condottiere” (a soldier for hire), “Miarolitic” (of igneous rock), or “Ankyloglossia” (limited movement of the tongue). And when only two spellers remained, the other finalist understandably stumbled on “Bewusstseinslage” (a state of consciousness devoid of sensory components). So only two words stood between Nemmani and final victory:

First up – “Haecceitas” (the status of being an individual). Nailed it.

And then finally, “Koinonia” (spiritual community).  
K-O-I-N-O-N-I-A. Koinonia.

Confetti rained down and Nemmani smiled broadly as he was declared champion of the bee. He later said he knew the spelling of the final word as soon as the official pronouncer read it.

And so did many others who recognized the word. It has become a fairly commonly used word in church circles, identifying everything from coffee shops to youth groups and Sunday School classes, from worship bands to retreats and summer camps. Author Rachel Held Evans on Twitter, “If you grew up evangelical in the 90s you can totally spell *koinonia* because you had a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/05/31/scripps-national-spelling-bee-2019-final-round-results-cochampion-eight-winners/1292548001/>

<sup>2</sup> From a sermon starter in *Homiletics*: “How do you spell ‘Koinonia’?” September 8, 2019.

crush on the drummer for a youth group band by that name!”<sup>3</sup> Many of us are probably more familiar with Koinonia Farms – the intentional community in Georgia that gave birth to Habit for Humanity. And though it predated my time here, I understand that there used to be a Koinonia Sunday School class at BWCOB that many of you probably still remember or were even members of.

So chances are that most of us are at least marginally familiar with the term “koinonia,” and we know that it is used to speak about Christian fellowship, partnership, or communion – the common life shared by followers of Jesus. But while we may be familiar with and have a basic understanding of the word, what we are not generally equipped to do is recognize it when we see it in the scriptures. Case in point – can anyone tell me where the word koinonia appears in today’s scripture reading?

It comes in verse 6, where Paul writes “*I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.*” In the original Greek, Paul prays that “the *koinonia* of your faith may become effective ...” Kinda sneaky, isn’t it?

This is one of the reasons I decided to use a puzzle for the title of today’s homily – even if you know the word, you probably had to do a little bit work to decipher it. (And I have to say I have been pleasantly surprised by how many of you have texted or emailed me over the past couple of weeks to let me know that you figured it out!) We have a tendency to overlook and under-appreciate koinonia even when it is right in front of us, just as we often use the word fellowship too lightly in church circles. We serve fellowship meals in rooms we call fellowship halls, our youth get together for fellowship time, and we often give the impression that “fellowship” is just church-speak for a social gathering. And our “Fellowship and Recreation Commission” – which right now is busting their rears out back getting ready for our church picnic – is often thought of as little more than a party planning committee that makes sure the snacks are laid out, the coffee pot is filled, the burgers are grilled, and the supplies for the games are all gathered. There’s nothing wrong with any of that.

But *koinonia* is a much richer form of fellowship. It isn’t that church picnics and parties are significantly different than other gatherings, or even that they have that unmistakable “Christian” flavor and feel. What makes *koinonia* fellowship significant is that it *means* something. The sharing and fellowship of *koinonia* aren’t just about common activities and good times. It’s about connecting us to one another and to God – or as the hymn which we will be singing shortly puts it – “bonding us gladly one to the other...facing the cross.”<sup>4</sup>

Philemon apparently knew a thing or two about this kind of *koinonia*. Paul had heard reports of the way his love and faith had refreshed the hearts of the community that gathered in his home – of the *koinonia* they shared. And this *koinonia* is ultimately the very reason that Paul says he has the faith and confidence to take a risk not only for himself, but also for his new friend Onesimus, in sending him to Philemon and asking him to receive him no longer as a slave but rather as a beloved brother<sup>5</sup>. Paul was asking Onesimus – someone he now viewed and

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Shellnutt. “Why the Winning Spelling Bee Word, ‘Koinonia,’ Is So Easy for Christians.” *Christianity Today*. June 1, 2018. Online: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/june/koinonia-scripps-spelling-bee-winning-word-christians.html>

<sup>4</sup> *God of the Bible (Fresh as the Morning)* v. 5.

<sup>5</sup> v. 16

named as his child<sup>6</sup> – to make himself completely vulnerable and return to his former master, a master that the text insinuates that he may have wronged in some way, and trust that the bonds of *koinonia* – that highest form of Christian communion – might in reality be effective.

It is an immense risk. And truth be told, we aren't actually sure what became of Onesimus and Philemon. We who declare with Paul that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free<sup>7</sup> want to believe that Onesimus was welcomed with the open arms and gracious hospitality befitting a family of faith. And given that this letter was kept, copied, circulated, and eventually came to be considered sacred scripture gives us every reason to assume that Philemon probably took Paul's words to heart and received Onesimus as a brother in Christ on his return. But in truth we don't know what happened. All we really know is that Paul had enough confidence in the *koinonia* of Philemon's house church that he was willing to take such a risk and entrust the life of his friend to it, praying that it was more than surface deep; that it was real, operative, effective. That their *koinonia* really meant something.

With such a letter in hand, suddenly, the fellowship of the church doesn't seem at all inconsequential. That is, if it really *means* something in real life.

When we in the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren say in our statement of identity and guiding values<sup>8</sup> that we seek to welcome and include all persons in our shared life together – that we value sharing life together and including all persons in our common life – what we are really saying is that we welcome everyone to join us in *koinonia* – sacred community. And while that sometimes means we enjoy getting together for picnics and potlucks, game nights and overnights – on a deeper level it means that we are bound together – that we share our joys and sorrows; that we celebrate together on the mountaintops and walk together through the valleys of grief; that we are there when someone needs an arm to lean on, that we stand up for each other when one of us needs an advocate; and ultimately, when the moment of truth comes, that we are willing to risk the leap of faith that it takes to really trust the bonds of *koinonia*.

That leap of faith is what sticks out to me when I read the letter to Philemon. The faith that it took for Paul to write and send the letter. The trust that it must have taken for Onesimus to follow the advice of his new spiritual mentor and risk returning to his former master. The faith both Paul and Onesimus placed in the *koinonia* of Philemon's house church.

That kind of faith and trust is a lot to live up to. But such is our calling as followers of Jesus. And like Paul, I pray that the sharing of *our* faith – *our koinonia* – may become effective when we perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

K-O-I-N-O-N-I-A. *Koinonia*.

With the grace of God, the love of Jesus, and the encouragement of the Spirit, may it be so with us...

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<sup>6</sup> v. 10

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:28

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bwcob.org/about-us/vision-identity/>

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**~*Kyle Remnant***Hymn**     *Peace before us***Spoken Prayer**

Gracious God--

Let all around us be peace...

When our world is constantly at war  
 When conflict arises in our relationships  
 When storms of anxiety & uncertainty surge within us  
 Let all around us be peace...

Let all around us be love...

When forces of power and greed drive our world apart  
 When people become targets of hate because of who they are, where they are from, or  
     who they love  
 When we struggle to see ourselves as worthy of love  
 Let all around us be love...

Let all around us be light...

When devastating storms destroy homes and uproot families  
 When communities are shaken by the loss of someone close  
 When clouds of doubt cripple our daily living  
 Let all around us be light...

Let all around us be hope...

May we, led by the Spirit, be an example of peace in a tumultuous time  
 May we embody your love in a culture that needs it more and more every day  
 And may we, like Jesus, be a light to a world that dwells in darkness  
 Let us, all around, be hope...

God, we *are* your community, your church. Yes, we are individuals, each with our own sets of hopes and fears. Yet you bind our hearts together and in you, we are one. We rejoice together. We weep together. Our fears, our hopes, our aims – are one. So as we continue our journey together, guide us more and more into your perfect love and friendship, that we might truly be a community of your *koinonia*.

Through Christ our Lord,

Amen.

**Hymn**     *Bless'd be the tie that binds*