

How Do You Spell "Koinonia"?

Sunday, September 15, 2019

Philemon 1-21

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Praxitelean [prak-**sit**-l-ean] – pertaining to the ancient sculptor Praxiteles (4th century BC). Ispaghul ['is-pə-ˌgül] – an Old World plaitain. Telyn [telən] – a old Celtic harp. You don't see these words every day, but they all showed up in the 2018 Scripps National Spelling Bee, broadcast live on ESPN. Sixteen finalists knocked them down, one at a time, in what *The Washington Post* described as “a breathtaking show of spelling skill.”

Among the finalists was a 14-year-old from Texas named Karthik Nemmani. Although this was his first national spelling bee, Nemmani showed the poise of a veteran throughout the contest, spelling with little emotion and keeping his arms clasped behind his back. He was confronted with the following words, any one of which could have caused him to stumble: *condottiere* [Italian: kändəˈtyerē], meaning a knight or soldier available for hire; *miarolitic* [mēərōˈlitik], meaning of igneous rock; *cendre* [French: sādR], meaning a moderate blue; *ankyloglossia* [ang-kuh-loh-**glaw**-see-uh], meaning tongue-tied; *jagüey* [Spanish: xagˈwei], meaning an East Indian tree

Nemmani spelled them all perfectly. Then, with the contest narrowed to two finalists, the other speller made a mistake, misspelling “bewusstseinslage” [German: bə-ˈvʊst-ˌzɪn(t)s-ˌlägə], meaning a state of consciousness which cannot be associated with any particular sensation. Only two words stood between Nemmani and final victory. First, “haecceitas” [Latin: həkˈsi:tus], meaning the status of being an individual. Nemmani nailed it. And then, “koinonia,” a word meaning spiritual communion. “K-O-I-N-O-N-I-A.” Nemmani smiled broadly as confetti rained down. He spelled *koinonia* correctly and took home the trophy as champion of the bee.

Most of us would break out in a cold sweat if we had to spell *koinonia*. We'd surely panic if we asked to define it, but it is a term worth exploring. *Koinonia* is a Greek word that appears 19 times in the New Testament. Critically important for Christians, *koinonia* is often translated as sharing, contribution, fellowship, or spiritual communion.

In his letter to Philemon, the apostle 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*” (v. 6). In the

original Greek of the New Testament, Paul prays that “the *koinonia* of your faith may become effective...” Living a *koinonia* life is greater than any spelling challenge. *Koinonia* is something that we need to understand and implement in our mission and ministries.

For starters, *koinonia* means **sharing**. Paul's letter to Philemon is Paul's only surviving private letter. It is a very personal message to a man who is a slave-owner. In the letter, Paul encourages Philemon to forgive a runaway slave and welcome him back, not as a piece of property, but as a brother in Christ. “*I pray that the sharing of your faith,*” writes Paul, “*may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ*” (v. 6). Paul prays that Philemon will embrace the Christian faith ever more deeply, so that he will see this runaway slave in a whole new light: “*no longer as a slave,*” writes Paul, but as “*a beloved brother*” (v. 16).

Such sharing is often experienced by American Christians when they take part in short-term mission trips to countries in the developing world, such as Guatemala. In-country, Americans have a shared experience of the Christian faith with their foreign partners, and they discover the tremendous power of faith, hope, and love in very impoverished environments. Lives are changed through such sharing of Christian faith, especially when the experience is grounded in good deeds and beneficial relationships.

Koinonia also means **contributions**. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reports that Christians in “*Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources* (literally “make certain gifts to”) *with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem*” (15:26). Here, *koinonia* is translated as “resources,” but it could also be translated as “contributions” or “gifts.”

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul brags that the Macedonians made contributions “*beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints*” (8:3-4). Such generous self-giving is the essence of *koinonia*. Such a call to generosity is repeated in the letter to the Hebrews, which says, “*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God*” (13:16). When we share in a sacrificial way, we are practicing true *koinonia*.

Koinonia may also mean **fellowship**. The book of Acts says that the first converts to Christianity “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (2:42). “God is faithful,” says Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, “*by [God] you were called into the fellowship of [God's] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*”

(1:9). And John writes in his first letter that *"we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with the Son Jesus Christ"* (1:3). *Koinonia* is fellowship, companionship, friendship, kinship.

Unfortunately, we often use the word fellowship too lightly in church circles. We serve fellowship luncheons in fellowship halls, which makes fellowship seem like a simple social gathering. *Koinonia* is always a much richer form of fellowship. *Koinonia* refers to "what we have in common and what we share as Christian men and women and young people," said the evangelical scholar John Stott. *"Koinonia* expresses what we share in together, what we have received together, what we participate in together."

The apostle's teaching and fellowship. The fellowship of God's Son. Fellowship with each other. Fellowship with God and God's Spirit. This is more than a fellowship lunch; it's what we share together, what we have received together, and what we participate in together.

Such fellowship can even involve struggle. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks of wanting *"to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death"* (3:10). Sometimes translated "the fellowship of his sufferings," this verse speaks of *koinonia* as participation in the sufferings of Jesus, a sharing that connects Paul even more closely to Jesus. *Koinonia* means living out our faith, our joys, and our sorrows together as the family of faith.

Finally, *koinonia* means **spiritual communion**. *"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?"* Paul asks the Corinthians. *"The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?"* (1 Corinthians 10:16). Paul sees the cup as a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ. He sees the bread as a *koinonia* in the body of Christ. When we receive the sacrament called Communion, we are sharing and participating in a meal that connects us deeply to Christ and to each other.

According to many Christian traditions, the Holy Spirit makes Christ present in Communion. But the presence of Jesus is not limited to this holy meal. At the end of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers a set of words that are often used as a blessing at the end of Christian worship, *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you"* (13:13). Paul's hope is that the communion-fellowship-*koinonia* of the Spirit will remain with everyone long after they

have read his letter. Similarly, we hope that the *koinonia* of the Spirit will remain with us, even after a service of worship is over.

The Scripps National Spelling Bee has become rather biblical in recent years. Last year's competition included the word "pseudepigrapha" (Jewish writings of the prophets and patriarchs), which comes up in Christian scholarly circles. Back in 2009, the winning word was "laodicean," meaning indifferent or halfhearted. It comes from the book of Revelation, where the church of Laodicea is criticized for being *"neither cold nor hot"* (3:15).

Philemon was not a member of the church of Laodicea, and there is no evidence that his fellowship or *koinonia* was indifferent or halfhearted toward Onesimus. But, thanks to Paul's reminder, we have reason to hope that Philemon welcomed Onesimus back, exercising a true spirit of *koinonia*.

A challenge for Christian congregations today is to be committed to *koinonia*. Not indifferent or halfhearted in the mission and ministries of the church, but fully invested in generous giving, rich fellowship, and spiritual communion. This is how we remain connected to God and to each other, sharing the Christian faith through good deeds and loving relationships. That's how you spell *koinonia*.

Prayer: Loving God, thank You for all these brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. You make us one in him and are building us into a spiritual temple of living stones, each with our own function, in the heavenly kingdom of God. Instill in each of our hearts an increasing thirst after holiness and righteousness; and give us an ever-deepening love for each other and for You. Keep us we pray from petty arguments and careless words so that we may minister to one another in true Christian fellowship and godly love. Embolden us in our ministries to use and value the gifts and talents of each member to the praise of Your holy name. Be glorified in each member of Your body and use us as witnesses to the love of Jesus. Unite us in Christian fellowship – *koinonia* – as we watch for the any day return of the Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

Sources:

- Shellnutt, Kate. "Why the winning spelling bee word, 'koinonia,' is so easy for Christians." *Christianity Today*, June 1, 2018, christianitytoday.com.
- Wang, Amy B. "Champion crowned at Scripps National Spelling Bee from record-breaking field." *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2018, washingtonpost.com.