

Mark 8: 27-30

**The Christ of Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

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In August of 1996 the German Government announced that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was no longer regarded under the law as a traitor. For me that was a pretty bizarre announcement. How could someone who opposed Hitler and Nazism, and who paid for his freedom and ultimately life for it be considered a traitor 51 years after the end of WWII?

For the generation of German Christians who had the task of rebuilding the German Protestant Church, and those that followed – like me - Bonhoeffer was a hero, an amazing human being who was among the very few Christians in then Nazi-Germany having the guts to stand up to Hitler and his regime. For Christians in East Germany, Bonhoeffer became a symbol of Christian resistance; resistance that was still needed as the church existed under Communist government.

For the summer months we are offering you a sermon series about “modern-day saints.” Now I know that we could debate who is and what defines a ‘saint.’ Speaking for myself, saints are people who live or lived out their faith in inspiring ways, and who continue to make a difference in our lives, in our faith journey, and in the life of the church.

I chose Dietrich Bonhoeffer because I believe that those who died because of their faith deserve not just a special place in the heart of all believers, but by recalling their life, we might gain fresh strength and courage to be faithful witnesses for Jesus Christ in our time and day. For me personally as a minister, Bonhoeffer’s theology and thoughts certainly have had a big influence of how I understand of what it means to follow Christ and what the role of the Church should be.

It became painfully clear in my research that I cannot give you an in-depth account of his life but share some milestones with you.

He grew up in an aristocratic and accomplished family. Physicians, scientists, lawyers, ministers and musicians lined the family tree. Because of his own intellect and home tutoring, he jumped several grades in school, and finished at the age of 16.

At 14 he knew that he wanted to study theology which was not well-received by his father and brothers. His mother was a Christian but his father and the rest of the family were agnostic. They rarely darkened the doorway of a church. His brothers were begging him not to squander his life in such a “poor, feeble, boring petty, bourgeois institution as the church.” “If what you say is true,” Dietrich retorted, “then I shall reform it!” In a way, he did.

At 17 he began his university studies in theology in Tübingen and completed them in Berlin. At 21 he had finished his doctoral dissertation and had fulfilled the requirements for ordination.

During his short career he served German churches in Barcelona and London, spent a year at Union Theology Seminary, wrote his second doctoral dissertation, and became a professor and teacher at Berlin University. He immersed himself in the Ecumenical movement. Between 1935 and 1937 Bonhoeffer led an underground seminary of the Confessing Church until it was closed down. By 1938 he was declared subversive and was forbidden to lecture, preach, write and publish anything, and he was banned from visiting his parents’ home in Berlin.

As Hitler gained more and more ground, the life and death struggle for the church was underway. From the very beginning, Bonhoeffer was critical and defiant of the regime. He became a leader of the Confessing Church, the only religious organization that attempted to stand ground against the National Church that supported Hitler. It was called confessing because it confessed that there could be only one leader of the Christians, and that was Christ.

As WWII swept over Europe, opposition to Hitler grew. There were a number of conspiracies of which Bonhoeffer knew and was part of. All of them failed. Eventually he was arrested and condemned to death. He died on April 9, 1945, just a few weeks before the end of the war.

Bonhoeffer had the chance to wait out the war in the United States. In 1939 he came back to the US to be a guest professor at Union Theological Seminary. But in his heart he could not stay. He said that he had to go back because he was German, he was a Christian, and he believed that he must stand with his country in its present suffering if he were to participate in the future rebuilding.

Bonhoeffer was not famous during his lifetime. He did not aspire to become a leading theologian. Very few things of his writings were published. He did not set out to write about his theology

systematically. In his heart he wanted to be a pastor. He was not a 'liberal' but a faithful Lutheran who had a healthy understanding of sin and repentance.

In his writing, preaching and teaching, one theme comes up again and again: Who is and where is Jesus Christ for us today?

Bonhoeffer's Christ is not the Christ of the idealists, who transmits the meaning of life or a harmonious world view. It is not the Christ of the individualists, who guarantees strength for life, happiness, and personal and eternal salvation. It is not the Christ that fits our lives and our hopes.

When Bonhoeffer talks about Christ, he always means the biblical Christ, who is faithful to the earth, who lives among people and brings them together. He brings salvation *and* healing from suffering and death, liberation from guilt and sin, liberation from the forces which are destroying the earth, among which war and injustice are the most terrible. This was this Christ that drove Bonhoeffer in everything.

Life and faith for him consisted not of different categories (like employment, family, economy, and politics), but of a single reality. This earth could not be considered apart from Christ's footsteps, which are impressed in it. Christ's manger stands on the earth, his cross is rammed into the earth, his grave is dug into the earth. Because God became human in Christ, there is only the one reality, which includes God, world and human persons. This Christ is there for others; not as a triumphing power but as the crucified, the one who suffers by us and with us.

This is the Christ "for whom an uncompromising stand is worthwhile." This Christ is the direction, measure and content of the church. The church's right to exist comes only from the fact that Christ is in it and works through it.

This is why the highest demands are placed on the church. This is why it was impossible for Bonhoeffer to give even the smallest space in the church to the German Christians who wanted to make the Lord of the church secondary to the laws of the German race, as the National Socialists understood them. This is why he suffered so from the indecisiveness of many Christians, pastors and parishes in a time when Christ expected a confession from everyone. The Confessing Church was for him *the* church of Jesus Christ in Germany. No one could separate themselves from it without also separating themselves from Christ.

Setting one's mind and heart on following Jesus might strike some as being too simplistic, and yet, according to Bonhoeffer, it was precisely this straightforward allegiance to Jesus Christ and full

dependence on him that is what the Christian faith is all about. This allegiance cannot be replaced by anything or anyone else.

Following the living Christ in all things has always been a challenge for Christians over the centuries. There have always been allegiances that pull us away or we allow them to pull us away from the center of our faith. It is our journey of faith to hopefully get close to what it means to follow Christ with heart, mind, body and soul. And maybe for some it remains an ideal, and not something that can really ever be achieved in our lifetime.

Bonhoeffer himself reflected on this. While in prison for his participation with fellow Christians and co-conspirators in a plot to assassinate Hitler, he wrote about the need for a truly human faith capable of living in this world. "I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life or something like it...I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith."

He went on to describe what this actually means for the ordinary Christian. Here is where it becomes challenging for us. "One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself (setting aside our own ambition for power, wealth, and importance) but live unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities (not avoiding the hard decisions and challenges but embracing them). In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings but those of God in the world — watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a human being and a Christian. (Letters and Papers from Prison, 369-370.)

When Jesus asked Peter, who do you say that I am? (Mark 8), both of them knew that everything was at stake in his answer. Centuries later, in civilized Germany, Bonhoeffer also knew what was at stake in the answer.

"The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if men imagine they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves." (The Cost of Discipleship, 68.)

From the very beginning, faith in Jesus Christ has been distorted, corrupted and abandoned by many. Yet, wherever that faith has been maintained and grounded in following Jesus, a remnant of the

church has stood against the powers of death and reminded the world of the suffering love of God for all, by standing with outcasts, the persecuted and those who suffer.

Who is and where is Jesus Christ for us today? It is an important question for all who seek to be faithful disciples today. It was important for Bonhoeffer. His answer cost him his life. By giving Christ his heart, he made it clear where he stood. He did not compromise. He did not waver in the face of danger nor in the face of death.

On April 8, 1945, Bonhoeffer held a last morning service for his fellow prisoners in Schoenberg, near the primary court at Flossenbürg. There he was hanged in the early morning of April 9.

The day before he held a last worship service for his fellow prisoners in which he said: "To whomever God is real and ever close, death is, indeed, a station on the road to freedom, even the highest feast, because one who acted responsibly may now step from the twilight of all our actions into the light of God. Anyone who is not gratified with successes and recognition and is not sure of having always taken the right path, longs for the time in which everything will become clear. "

Bonhoeffer's final words to his fellow prisoners were: "This is the end -- for me the beginning of life." This is no devaluation of earthly life. Bonhoeffer knew that this life is protected and judged by the God who gives life. He longed for the face of God, in which freedom lights up in its final perfection as the freedom of God, a gift in love to all. Amen

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