

The View from Below

Summer Saints Sermon Series: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (June 28, 2020)

Friendship Presbyterian Church

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (I Corinthians 1:18-31, NRSV)

So far this summer, in our "Summer Saints" sermon series, we have examined the life and witness of the French philosopher and author Albert Camus and then Georgia's own Lillian Smith, writer and powerful advocate for racial and social justice. Speaking from their own vantage points in the mid-20th century, both proved to have much to offer us today, as we confront the powers, within and without, and pursue God's dream for the world.

Today, we remain in the early to mid-20th century, but shift our focus to Germany. Our "saint" for this Sunday is a theologian whose work has been with me for almost all my Christian life, and has probably influenced me and my faith more than any other. Today, we delve deep into the life of German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and ultimately martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was born into an aristocratic, highly intellectual (and only nominally religious) German family in 1906, one of eight children in all. The family household dynamic and his parents' values enabled him to receive the very highest level of

education and encouraged his curiosity, which led him to explore diverse interests. In fact, his skills at the piano grew so rapidly that many in his family believed he was headed for a career in music. When at age 14, young Dietrich announced that he intended to become a minister and theologian, the family was surprised ... and not very pleased.

His academic skills were considerable. After graduating from the renowned University of Tübingen with the equivalent of a combined Bachelors and Masters degree, he completed his Doctor of Theology degree (summa cum laude) from the University of Berlin at the tender young age of 21! His dissertation was called a “theological miracle” by Protestant theology’s biggest star at the time, Karl Barth.

But for all this, Bonhoeffer was still too young to be ordained! And so, in 1930, at the age of 24, he went to the United States for postgraduate study and a teaching fellowship at Union Theological Seminary in New York. While he was unimpressed with the level of theology he found in the academy here, he did form some life-changing friendships that would endure. He became particularly close with a black fellow-seminarian named Frank Fisher, and through him was introduced to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where he became a Sunday School teacher and regular participant in its congregational life.

Here he gained first-hand experience of the hardships and spirituality of the African-American community, and discovered a life-long love for its spirituals, a large collection of which he would take back to Germany. Each Sunday, he heard Abyssinian’s renowned pastor Adam Clayton Powell Sr. preach a *whole* gospel, with its justice, and he became sensitized not only to social injustices experienced by minorities, but also the indifference of so much of the white church in response.

He reflected, “Here one can truly speak and hear about sin and grace and the love of God ... the Black Christ is preached with rapturous passion and vision.” Later he would refer to what he learned and experienced abroad as the point at which he “turned from phraseology to reality” ... the point at which he moved beyond merely academic theology and began to become a dedicated man of *faith*, resolved to find and follow Jesus, and carry out his teaching as revealed in the gospels.

After his life-changing year in New York, he returned to Germany in 1931 to become a lecturer at the University of Berlin, and soon became closely identified with the ecumenical movement. Later that same year, now 25 years old, the path was clear and he was ordained to the ministry. With his family background, accomplishments, and prodigious talents, his prospects for career success were as bright as anyone’s could be. And then, in January 1933, Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany and the Nazis came to power.

Bonhoeffer was among the first to recognize the dangers that they posed to the Church and to authentic Christianity, and was soon to see the existential danger they posed to the Jews. Just two days after Hitler was installed as Chancellor, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address in which he attacked Hitler and warned Germany against slipping into an idolatrous cult of the Führer, who could very well turn out to be a Verführer (mis-leader, or seducer). He was cut off the air in the middle of a sentence. Two months later, in April, he raised the first voice for church resistance to Hitler's persecution of Jews, declaring that the church must not simply "bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam a spoke into the wheel itself."

Thereafter, his pastoral and church activities found him increasingly in the crosshairs of the regime, as he tirelessly resisted both the Nazification of the German church and the regime's increasingly hostile and violent stance towards Jews and other minorities. As war came to be imminent, Bonhoeffer was particularly troubled by the prospect of being conscripted. He had long been a committed pacifist and an enemy of the Nazis, and so he could never swear an oath to Hitler and fight in his army, though not to do so was potentially signing his own death warrant.

And so, it was at this juncture that Bonhoeffer left Germany for the United States in June 1939 at the invitation of his old friends at Union Seminary in New York. They had arranged a teaching position for him at Union, where he could work and develop his thought in safety. But almost as soon as he arrived, he was tortured by inner turmoil ... by the sense that he had run away from where he belonged.

His American friends urged him to remain here in the United States where he would be free and out of the Nazis' reach. But he couldn't live with himself. In a letter to his American theological mentor Reinhold Niebuhr, he wrote:

I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice from [a place of] security.

After only a month, he returned to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic. It was a fateful decision. The die was cast.

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was further harassed by Nazi authorities, as he was forbidden to speak in public and was required to regularly report his activities to the police. In 1941, he was forbidden to print or to publish. In the meantime, he had joined

the Abwehr, a wing of German military intelligence which was secretly working to overthrow the regime. His brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi, already part of the Abwehr, brought him into the organization on the claim that his wide ecumenical contacts would be of use to Germany, thus protecting him from conscription to active military service. It provided him a perfect cover for his active pursuit of Hitler's downfall, and also gave him tools and resources to do what he could – as the Abwehr was also working to help German Jews escape to Switzerland.

But you knew that it couldn't last. A government raid of the Abwehr offices recovered documents which named Bonhoeffer himself – pointing to his knowledge of conspiracies against Hitler's life. In April 1943, Bonhoeffer and Dohnányi were arrested.

Imprisoned for almost two years, he continued his spiritual outreach among fellow prisoners and even the guards, and kept up an enormous correspondence which would, years later, come to be collected and published as *Letters and Papers from Prison* – a book which would have an enduring impact on all subsequent theology – and very much on me.

In the closing days of the war, Hitler himself gave the order to execute Bonhoeffer and his fellow Abwehr conspirators. He was led away just as he concluded his final Sunday service and asked an English prisoner to remember him to Bishop George Bell of Chichester if he should ever reach his home, telling him, "This is the end—for me the beginning of life."

He was executed by hanging at the Flossenburg concentration camp at dawn on April 9, 1945, just days before American soldiers liberated the camp. Three weeks later, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker.

There are many theologians you can study and it not make one whit of difference if you ever know anything of their biography. It is their *ideas* that matter, right? And yet, with Bonhoeffer, his ideas and the life he lived are inseparable, an unbreakable whole. The entire arc of his life is not only a theological journey but a profoundly *spiritual* one – one in which his perspective changes, from that of privilege to that of one who identifies with others in their struggles.

From the very first, from his doctoral dissertation onward, the great question of his life – though he didn't explicitly articulate it until his prison letters – was "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" And he intuitively knew early on that for the answer to have any meaning or value, it was going to have to be one rooted in *real life*, not just something high-minded and dogmatic, pointing to some ethereal object of worship.

Even back to his doctoral dissertation, Bonhoeffer saw that Christ is present in the world through the community that gathered in his name. That the Church itself, as the Body of Christ, is the means by which Christ reaches into the world and brings healing and hope.

But it was pre-eminently his experience in New York, his immersion into the life and struggles of the members of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, that he began to see that the Christ they preached and celebrated and followed was more than just an abstract doctrine, but a living divine reality fully identifying with the pain and daily humiliations of being an African-American in 1930's America.

This lived experience changed Bonhoeffer forever, and he carried this transformation back with him to Germany. As the Nazis came to power and began to infiltrate the churches, most pastors who opposed the regime focused their ire on Hitler's threat to the Church's independence. But Bonhoeffer stood nearly alone in seeing clearly that the struggle of the *Jews* was the Church's struggle too ... that attacks on them were attacks on Christ himself.

In a short piece that he wrote after ten years of struggling against the Nazis, Bonhoeffer wrote these words:

There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled — in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.
(“After Ten Years,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*)

Over his life, Bonhoeffer came to see life and faith through the eyes of those who suffer. In taking his place alongside those rejected by the world, he would live into the answer to his own great question: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”

In New York, in Germany, he lived those struggles himself and put himself on the line when others would turn away. It was a hard road, for it was the way of the Cross, and in the end, it would cost him everything, but he came to know in himself the truth of the Apostle Paul's paradoxical words, that

... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (I Corinthians 1:27-29, NRSV)

To the glory of God! Amen.