

7.20.25 Sermon Transcript – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Nearly 100 years ago, in 1933, Hitler became the chancellor of Germany. Of course, we know much about that time in history. We can turn everywhere and find out all kinds of things that were happening during that time. But what you may not be aware of is the way in which the church was complicit and even supportive of what Hitler was doing. Now, that is not a universal truth, but it was certainly broadly true. In 1933, that year, there was a group of German Christians that kind of just came out of the woodwork and they were Protestants who sought to align the church, Christianity, with Nazi ideals. They promoted a Nazified Christianity which declared loyalty to Hitler and to the fatherland over Christ. They sought to remove the Old Testament from the Bible saying it was too Jewish. They replaced Jesus, the Jew, with this picture of Christ as the strong, heroic, Aryan, blonde Christ who opposed Judaism. And their slogan was, “One People, one Reich, one Church.” There were many congregations that started hanging swastikas in their sanctuaries, near the cross, sometimes even in place of the cross. The church adopted something called the Aryan paragraph, which was a law that excluded people of Jewish ancestry from church employment, even if they were baptized Christians, even if they were clergy. Many churches expelled Jewish Christians from their ministries in order to comply with this Aryan paragraph. Even more, Hitler, and his Third Reich sought to merge the many different Protestant denominations in Germany into one national unified Reich church. You could go into many congregations and hear pastors preaching sermons glorifying Hitler, saying, “He’s a chosen leader. He’s the one who’s going to help restore our country.” They were even comparing him to figures like Moses or even Christ. Now, some churches were not that outspoken – many simply remained silent. Most churches did not protest the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which stripped Jews of their citizenship and their civil rights. Very few spoke out against the Kristallnacht, in 1938, when Jewish homes and businesses and synagogues were destroyed, and very few clergy resisted the deportation of Jews – most remained passively compliant. This was a moment in history where the church is guilty of much.

But during this time, there arose a number of faithful leaders, Christian leaders, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one such leader. Now, if you know me, you’ve probably heard me talk about Bonhoeffer before. I have always had a fascination and a love of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I first read *The Cost of Discipleship*, I think, when I was in high school, late high school maybe, but certainly by the time I had gotten to college, I had read it. I’ve gone back and revisited that book multiple times. In fact, last year we had a church book study on the *Cost of Discipleship*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a Christian theologian and pastor who I have long admired, who has raised questions for me of what does it mean to be faithful to Christ in times of uncertainty where there are many competing allegiances. He came into life and ministry in an age where the line between faith and politics was dangerously blurred, where crosses were next to swastikas. And so we turn to Bonhoeffer as someone who we can look to to teach us something about what it means to be faithful today, even though he lived 100 years ago.

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906. He was part of a well-educated family. His family was not actually particularly religious, though he always had a fascination with philosophy and theology. That's what he studied and he ended up becoming a pastor. He spent some time in New York City studying at Union Theological Seminary and while he was there, he ended up attending the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. In doing so, he had an experience in the black church where he learned much about liberation and the way in which God cares for people who are experiencing marginalization – that was a hugely significant part of his own life and formation. Now, Bonhoeffer was tempted to stay in New York. But at this time, things were really starting to pick up in Germany, and things were going downhill quickly. In a correspondence with one of his close friends, Bonhoeffer had this realization. He said, "If I want to have any part in being able to help rebuild Germany once we get through the other side of this, then I have to go back. I have to participate in the suffering of my society. I can't run away from it."

Bonhoeffer helped to form the Confessing Church, which was a network of churches that came together to oppose Nazi attempts to take over German Christianity. He openly criticized the church's silence as Jews were persecuted. He joined the resistance movement. He was involved in efforts to smuggle Jews out of Germany, which he was arrested for, and he later became a part of a plot to overthrow Hitler, which was not successful, and he was eventually executed for participating in that. But Bonhoeffer, he wrestled. He wrestled with what it meant to be a faithful Christian who gave his allegiance to Christ and nothing else. He was only 39 years old when he was executed, which blows my mind. I'm 42. But in what is probably his most famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer contrasts these ideas of costly grace and cheap grace. Cheap grace, he says, it's the sort of grace that we get when we pat ourselves on the back and say, "You know, I'm all good. I show up to church on Sunday, but my faith doesn't really require anything else of me." He says, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ." Bonhoeffer argues that cheap grace is what actually allowed so many German Christians to turn a blind eye while fascism rose, while Jews were singled out, persecuted, killed. But costly grace, Bonhoeffer says, is the grace that calls us to take up the cross of Jesus Christ. It's a road that is much harder. It's a road that requires obedience and allegiance to Jesus alone.

So as I mentioned, Bonhoeffer was a part of the Confessing Church movement, which sought to stand up as the church to what was happening in Nazi Germany. It stood against what the German Reich Church was becoming and it emerged in 1934 and when Karl Barth, who was a well-known theologian, convened a meeting and they put together what's called the Barman Declaration. This was a statement of these churches, these faith leaders, that they would not submit to the Third Reich – that they would not participate, that they would recognize only Christ as Lord, no government, no leader. And so they opposed state interference in church governance, liturgy, and theology. They rejected the Reich bishop. They maintained independent ordination, seminary training, and worship often in secret. Bonhoeffer actually led one of these underground, secret seminaries in Finkenwalde. The

Barman Declaration rejected the elevation of any earthly power, including the Fuhrer, and it directly confronted the German Christian movement and their attempts to Nazify theology. Now, there were some shortcomings of the Confessing Church, and one significant problem was they were focused and motivated mostly by the desire to have church autonomy. It was not so much driven by human rights, and that is certainly a shortcoming. Their primary concern was the independence of the church. Many members believe the church should avoid politics and only focus on spiritual matters. And in having more of a focus on church autonomy rather than human rights, the Confessing Church failed to oppose anti-Semitism as clearly as it should have.

Bonhoeffer, through all of this, started with the Confessing Church movement, but he began to realize this was not enough. And so that's when he to transport Jews to safety. This is where he took a more active role in resisting the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer teaches us a number of things that I think we can hear today. First, he saw nationalism as a form of idolatry. Christianity and following Christ demands allegiance to Christ alone. Nationalism is an idol that demands allegiance that rightly belongs only to God. He believed that when the church allowed the nation to become its primary identity and loyalty, that it had already betrayed the gospel. He says, "The church must confess that it has not proclaimed the whole counsel of God for fear of men, that it has not cried out for the victims of injustice." The church was silent when it should have cried out. For Bonhoeffer, to be a disciple of Christ meant that, first and foremost, he belongs to Christ. Not to blood, not to soil, not to flag. And any theology that places ethnic identity or national power over God's reign is false. It is a false gospel.

Bonhoeffer named the church's role in the world. He said the church has three tasks. The first one is to question the state's actions and to call it to accountability. The second is to aid the victims of state violence. And the third is when he says, "It's not enough to simply bandage the wounds of victims' crushed beneath the wheels of injustice. Rather, we are to jam a spoke into the wheel itself." In other words, we hold the state accountable. We mirror back to it how it is hurting and harming. Two, we help the people who are being hurt. But three, we do everything that we can to stop the injustice at its source. For Bonhoeffer, this wasn't just theological theory, this was something that he sought to live out in helping Jews escape and participating in the resistance and even becoming a part of the plot to overthrow Hitler.

So what does that mean for us today? What can we take away from Bonhoeffer's life and work and his setting? I'm sure we can see some similarities between then and now, though there are some differences, too, but what he teaches us remains the same. He teaches us to speak the truth, even when it is costly. Bonhoeffer wrote, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil." We cannot be neutral in situations of injustice. Second, Bonhoeffer teaches us that we have to root ourselves in community and in spiritual disciplines. Before he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote a shorter piece called *Life Together*, where he reminds us that our identity is rooted in community and that resistance is not sustained alone. We need each other. We need the church. He also reminds us that we have to reject the

idolatry of power. Bonhoeffer insisted that the church must be a prophetic voice, not a servant of the state. We serve Christ and defend the vulnerable. So in Nazi Germany, for Bonhoeffer, that meant standing with Jews, with political dissidents, with other marginalized people. That's part of why Bonhoeffer said, "I have to go back to Germany. I can't hide or run away. I have to be there amongst my people who are suffering." Defending the vulnerable. What does that mean for us today? Today it means standing with those who are suffering in our community, with immigrants, with the poor, with LGBTQ people, with people of color, with all who are marginalized. Finally, he teaches us that we have to be prepared to pay the cost. Discipleship isn't safe. It is costly, but it is faithful.

Bonhoeffer wrote much over the couple of years that he was in prison before his execution, and he would frequently write about he felt God continuing to call him to faithfulness, even as he was in prison. He did not regret. He was not fearful. (Well, I'm sure he had his moments of fear) But he stood with courage, knowing that ultimately the way of grace is costly, because it would indeed lead to his death. But he also knew that God had paid the cost. And he says what God has paid cannot be cheap for us. The death of Christ cannot be cheap for us. There's much more that I could say about Bonhoeffer. and wish I had the time to do it, but I think these few things are the things that we can all take away from his life and from his witness. In the scripture passage today, we hear the words, "If anybody wants to come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." Bonhoeffer. believed those words. He lived by those words, and he died by those words. May we have the courage to do the same, not with hatred, but with hope. Not with violence, but with conviction and faithfulness. Not with fear, but with faith and with courage. May we take up our cross and follow Jesus Christ. Amen.