

Matthew 16:13-20

This year we have commemorated the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. The occasion has been marked by speeches, services at military cemeteries such as the American cemetery in Normandy and protests from peace groups lamenting the horrors of that war, specifically the dropping of the Atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

Also noted, but without the fanfare of the other events, has been the 60th anniversary of the death of Lutheran pastor and anti-Hitler activist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I don't know how many of you have heard of this man, who was just 39 years old when he was hung in a Nazi concentration camp in April 1945. Today he is remembered for his powerful Christian witness in the face of evil. His witness for Jesus Christ remains a brilliant light for all who seek to be faithful disciples. From the beginning of the church, Christians have studied the lives of those who have died for their faith, whose example provides courage and hope for faithful living, especially in times of duress. Dietrich Bonhoeffer lives in that great company of Christian martyrs; by recalling his life-which is what I wish to do today-we can find fresh inspiration with God's help to be faithful witnesses for Jesus Christ.

One question mattered more than any other for Dietrich Bonhoeffer and it pressed upon him throughout his life right to the end. Who is Jesus Christ? It was as if he stood with the apostle Peter hearing Jesus ask him personally, "Who do you say that I am?" How one answers that question was decisive for Bonhoeffer. May I suggest that it remains as decisive for us in our day as it was for him in the totalitarian world of Nazi Germany.

When he was addressing the question, the church in Germany was confronted with the rise of Nazism. Sixty years later, we, the church of today must never forget that the majority of German Christians followed elected leaders and their own Church leaders who ignored the destruction of the Jews, tolerated idolatrous allegiance to Hitler and accepted false teachings regarding Jesus and the Christian faith. In the face of obvious evil, the Church meekly stood by and watched it.

However, not all Christians living in Nazi Germany acquiesced to the state; a small group of Christians across denominational lines- including Bonhoeffer-stood up to the evil of Nazism. They called themselves the Confessing Church and sought to remain faithful to Jesus Christ even under

severe persecution. In 1934 they signed the Barmen Declaration. The first article of the declaration takes up the matter of who Jesus Christ is: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." When the political situation in Germany began to deteriorate, Bonhoeffer was a faculty member of Union Theological Seminary in New York City; he could have stayed there but over the objection of his colleagues, the young Lutheran pastor knew he had to go back to his native country. He believed that he must stand with his country in its suffering. It was his passionate conviction that God is the One who left his exalted status to suffer for us in the flesh. For him this is the pattern Christians are to follow.

Bonhoeffer wrote to a close friend from his prison cell: "All that we may rightly expect from God, and ask him for, is to be found in Jesus Christ. If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, suffering and death of Jesus. It is certain that we may always live close to God and in the light of his presence, and that such living is an entirely new life for us; that nothing is impossible for us, because all things are possible with God." (Letters and Papers from Prison)

Ordinary people wondering how on earth to be faithful Christians have this rather simple prescription from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Focus on Jesus. Listen to his teachings, examine his life, notice his relationships, hear his questions and follow his invitation to be his disciple.

For Bonhoeffer, it was a personal encounter with Jesus Christ that was necessary to discover a lived faith and not merely abstract belief in God. What Bonhoeffer saw in the life of the average German Christian was a form of religion that had no connection to the transforming power of Christ, and therefore had no power to compel a person to risk for the sake of the Gospel. It is precisely the experience of casting oneself upon the living Christ that makes authentic discipleship possible.

Setting one's mind and heart on following Jesus might strike some as being too simplistic. Yet according to Bonhoeffer, it was precisely this straightforward allegiance to Christ and full dependence on him that was missing in the church.

In place of a decisive commitment to pattern one's life after Jesus, the church had offered vague religious principles or dogmatic statements that could be easily recited without requiring any personal allegiance to their truthfulness. When there is nothing personal at stake in what one believes, belief is easily abandoned or corrupted when threats against it arise.

This is exactly what Bonhoeffer believed would happen whenever the church has no personal stake in its profession of Jesus Christ. Ideas about Jesus are not the same as personal allegiance to Jesus. The difference is crucial for those who seek to be faithful disciples.

In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote: "Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily Christianity without discipleship and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Jesus Christ.... And a Christianity of that kind is nothing more or less than the end of discipleship. In such a religion, there is trust in God, but no following of Christ." (*The Cost of Discipleship*)

For Bonhoeffer the Christian is called to a holy life but that life can never be separated from living in the world- living in a Christ-like way amid the changes and chances of this life; He wrote: "By this worldliness, I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. 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. "This is why Bonhoeffer, a dedicated pacifist at the beginning of the war, discerned that the only way he personally could respond in the footsteps of Christ to Hitler's evil was to work actively against it; this decision led to his imprisonment and eventual death; but he never looked back. He wrote from prison right before he was hung, "I discovered in my life 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."

And of course this is actually what the New Testament teaches us. When Jesus asked Peter, 'who do you say that I am?' 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. In short, we must believe that Jesus is in fact who he says he is, and follow him the concrete circumstances of our lives, moving beyond intellectual assent.

Recall our Gospel reading from just several weeks ago. ‘Come,’ Jesus told Peter in the midst of the raging sea. Peter had to leave the ship to risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of the Lord. Bonhoeffer wrote: “If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith. Before he can believe, the utterly impossible situation on the seas must be displayed. 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 people imagine they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves.” (The cost of Discipleship)

From the very beginning of Christianity, faith in Jesus Christ has been distorted, corrupted and abandoned by many. Yet, whenever that faith has been maintained and grounded in following Jesus, a faithful remnant of the Church has stood against the principalities and powers of this world and reminded the world of the suffering love of God.

That the church in our time might do the same is why we remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Amen.