

Friend of God: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Matthew 7:12-14; 16:13-20

April 24, 2005

Today we remember one of the faithful friends of God, for April 9th was the sixtieth anniversary of his death at the hands of the Nazi regime. Christians have long 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 was born on February 4, 1906, along with his twin sister, Sabine, in the German city of Breslau. His father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a respected psychiatrist and professor in Breslau and later Berlin. His mother, Paula, was a teacher by training and taught their seven children at home in the first years of their schooling. Life at the Bonhoeffer home was disciplined, but pleasant.

Early on Dietrich showed interests in philosophy and music. Although the family did not regularly attend church, young Dietrich learned about Christianity from his mother and his nannies.

Three of the Bonhoeffer sons served in World War I. The oldest, Walter, was wounded in battle and died. After the war, most of the children chose careers in professional and scientific fields, but 14 year old Dietrich chose to study theology and become a minister, even against the protests of his father and brothers. He began formal theological studies at Tübingen University at the age of seventeen. He later transferred to the University of Berlin and studied under several prominent theologians. His dissertation examined the church's role in representing Christ to the community.

After completion of his dissertation, he served as pastor of a Lutheran congregation serving German expatriates in Barcelona, Spain. This experience exposed him to a wider range of social classes and provided opportunity to apply his ideals of Christian community.

In 1930 Bonhoeffer was awarded a fellowship allowing him to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. While there he learned to drive and took a road trip to Mexico with friends. Among other seminary friends, Bonhoeffer met Frank Fisher, an African American from Alabama. Fisher invited him to his African American Baptist church in Harlem, where Bonhoeffer spent much time teaching Sunday school and interacting with the congregation. Upon his return to Germany he took records of African American spirituals to introduce to his students.

The next year Bonhoeffer was invited to lecture at the University of Berlin. During this time he became involved in the ecumenical movement.

Simultaneously, Hitler's power was growing, having been elected Chancellor of Germany in early 1933. The deliberate, systemic annihilation of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, mentally disabled people, and nearly anyone who did not fit into the Aryan future was growing.

Nazi control permeated Germany, including the church. Hitler announced that he would put the church under his direct control. Church leaders began to set restrictions on members of Jewish descent participating in the church. The vast majority of Christians in Germany ignored the destruction of the Jews, tolerated idolatrous allegiance to Hitler, and accepted false teachings regarding Jesus and the Christian faith.

The entire Bonhoeffer family was concerned about the evil intentions of the National Socialist Party. Bonhoeffer's 90 year old grandmother, Julie Toffel, refused to comply with the boycott of Jewish businesses. Bonhoeffer expressed his opposition to anti-Jewish laws and was scheduled to broadcast a speech on the "Führer concept," but his microphone was mysteriously switched off moments into the broadcast. His opposition to the Nazis was now known, even as they were gaining power.

Frustrated with Germany and his fellow pastors, Bonhoeffer accepted a position as parish pastor in London. He served for eighteen months as pastor to two German congregations. During this time, the Nazis increased their pressure on the church. At a rally hosted by German Christians, speakers called for the removal of the Old Testament from the Bible because of its Jewish origins. More church leaders were succumbing to the Nazis. The first concentration camp was opened in 1933 at Dachau.

In response, Bonhoeffer felt called to increase his anti-Nazi activities, preaching against the Nazis in his sermons and assisting Jews and other German refugees coming to England. He continued to build his network of relationships with leaders of other denominations. He saw the ecumenical movement as a way to rebuild the church and establish world peace.

Through the Confessing Church, German pastors and laypeople tried to keep their church faithful to the historic Reformation confessions and resist the incursions of Nazi organization and ideology. In 1934 the Confessing Church established several seminaries in Germany. Bonhoeffer was invited to return to direct the seminary at Finkenwalde. The seminary was a community centered on study, service, and prayer. He procured funds and supplies for the seminaries, as well as lectured and began writing two of his most widely read books, *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*.

"The Confessing Church maintained a courageous resistance to Hitler's decree that every German institution had to reorganize itself in conformity with National Socialist policies....The church defied the

ideology that every person and every institution exists to serve the nation at the command of the Führer.”¹ The Gestapo increased pressure on pastors and ministers who refused to vow loyalty to the Führer. Eventually they discovered all of the secret Confessing Church seminaries and closed them down.

Friends arranged a teaching post for Bonhoeffer at Union Theological Seminary. After a brief visit to New York, he returned to Germany. He was determined to face the impending war at home in order to be part of Germany’s reconstruction afterwards. He wrote, “I have made a mistake in coming to America. 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.”

In September of 1939, German troops invaded Poland and World War II began. Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law, Dohnanyi, suggested that he become an agent of the *Abwehr*, the German counter-intelligence office, where he join a conspiracy that was secretly working from inside the government against Hitler. They needed a messenger to contact the Allies, and Bonhoeffer had the right connections in his ecumenical network. He had difficulty rationalizing his job as a spy while he was a man of God, but he decided that “it is better to do evil than to be evil.” His concern was to stop the mass murdering and the tyranny in his homeland. He once explained his participation in the resistance by this analogy: if a drunken driver drives into a crowd, what is the task of the Christian and the church? To run along behind to bury the dead and bind up the wounded? Or isn’t it, if possible, to get the driver out of the driver’s seat?

“For Bonhoeffer purity of witness was no longer the primary criterion of faithful discipleship. Taking responsibility in a concrete situation, with a willingness to risk guilt in the course of it, becomes the hallmark of Christian action. ‘Who stands fast?’ Bonhoeffer asked in an essay he wrote for several of his fellow conspirators at the end of 1942. ‘Only the one for whom neither reason, nor principles, nor conscience, nor freedom, nor virtue is the final measure, but who offers all this, when called in faith and in sole allegiance to God to obedient and responsible action.’”² In the face of evil, responsible action is a true imitation of Christ, a willingness to be despised and abused for the sake of those who have themselves been despised.

During this time Bonhoeffer met the granddaughter of one of his elderly friends and benefactors. He admired the young woman, named Maria von Wedemeyer, and they became engaged, although agreed to wait before marriage.

In 1943 the Gestapo increased its investigation of the *Abwehr*, leading to the arrest of Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law, Dohnanyi, on April 5, 1943. While imprisoned he gained the trust of fellow prisoners and even some of the prison guards. Because of his family's connections and his profession, he was afforded some privileges denied the average prisoner.

From prison he wrote letters to his friends and family, and sent them with the assistance of a few guards. His letters indicate his confidence that the investigation would end and that he would be released. While imprisoned he elaborated on his vision for the new community that would be reconstructed in Germany after the war. He wrote of how the commandment of God could be lived in four specific social settings, namely in the church, marriage and family, culture, and government. "In contrast to a regime that despised the relationships and loyalties of everyday life and sought to remake them in its own image, Bonhoeffer envisioned a society in which unity is expressed in institutional diversity."³ The church would be a vital instrument in encouraging persons to maintain their integrity across all the dimensions essential to a full human life.

As the conspiracy against Hitler was uncovered, Bonhoeffer was moved to the Central Security Office in Berlin and eventually to Buchenwald. On April 5, 1945 Hitler ordered that Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law not survive the war. Quick trials were held to find them guilty of conspiracy against the Fuhrer. On Sunday, Bonhoeffer offered a morning worship to celebrate the second Sunday of Easter. His final words to his fellow prisoners were, "This is the end—for me the beginning of life." In the early morning of April 9th, he was hung from the gallows and later buried in a mass grave.

Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer learned of their son Dietrich's death nearly four months later when they heard a BBC broadcast of a memorial service offered by his clergy friends in England. In 1996 the Berlin Public Prosecutor's Office announced that Bonhoeffer's death sentence was legally rescinded. The official clearing of his name suggests that Germany has formally recognized the moral validity of the cause for which he gave his life.

Bonhoeffer's collected writings fill six large volumes in German. A central focus in Bonhoeffer's writing, faith, and living witness is the question, "Who is and where is Jesus Christ for us today?" Christ is the person for others. For Bonhoeffer, faith was a matter not of taking a stance, but of being a follower of Christ. From his prison cell he wrote, "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.” Ordinary people who want to be faithful Christians must focus on Jesus, listen to his teachings, examine his life, notice his relationships, hear his questions, and follow his invitation to be his disciple. A personal encounter with Jesus Christ is necessary to discover a *lived* faith and not merely abstract belief in God.

If Christ is the person for others, then his people must form the church for others. 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. Bonhoeffer found that straightforward allegiance to Jesus Christ and full dependence on him was missing in the church. Ideas about Jesus are not the same as personal allegiance to Jesus. The difference is crucial to those who seek to be faithful disciples.

May the faith and witness, the life and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer inspire us to be not simply believers, but followers of Christ. May ours be a *lived* faith of responsible action in concrete situations. In the words of Bonhoeffer, “We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ’s large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real compassion that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating love of Christ for all who suffer.” May God grant us the courage to be people for others, united in a church for others.

¹ Robin Lovin, “Ethics for this world: What would Bonhoeffer do?” *Christian Century*, April 19, 2005, p. 27.

² Lovin, p. 27.

³ Lovin, p. 29.

Addittional Sources: