



Surrounded!
“WHAT WILL IT COST YOU?”
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER”

Rev. Laurie Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Luke 9:57-62

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back.

How many of you were alive during World War II? Raise your hand. We all know that World War II involved the United States and many of the European countries allied against Italy and Japan, but primarily against Germany and Adolf Hitler. Some of you remember what the war was like in our country. However, Toni Segitz from our church was living in Germany as a little girl, so she had a much different and more personal experience of the war and its aftermath.

I was not alive at the time, but I do know that the United States hesitated to get involved in the war until we were attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Most Americans did not even realize the genocide that was taking place in Germany at the time. However, there was another war going on simultaneously within Germany itself. It was between Hitler and people of faith who resisted as best they could. Often they were sent to concentration camps and executed, but their resistance made a permanent impact on our world. I want to tell you about one such person. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, the son of a university professor and leading authority on psychology and neurology. He had three brothers, a twin sister and three other sisters. He was born in Breslau but was raised in Berlin from the time he was six.

Everyone liked Dietrich. He was good-natured and had lots of friends. He loved his family and relished nature. Dietrich was loyal, charming and a good listener. Perhaps his greatest quality was his willingness to help others, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Dietrich had a special kind of courage that was willing to tackle tasks no one else wanted to do.

When he was fourteen, Dietrich decided he wanted to study theology as part of the Lutheran Church, which was the state church of Germany. He attended Tuebingen University and Berlin University and even went to Union Theological Seminary in New York for a year of post-graduate work. At Union Bonhoeffer was described as “a brilliant and theologically sophisticated young man.” At age twenty-four he became a lecturer in systematic theology at Berlin University, and at twenty-five he was ordained. Bonhoeffer’s writings gave him a solid reputation in the theological world, especially one book called *Nachfolge*, first published in 1937 when he was thirty-one years old. The English translation is *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The opening paragraph of *The Cost of Discipleship*, gives us these unforgettable words:

“Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.”¹

Those words are as relevant in 2015 as they were seventy-eight years ago. According to Bonhoeffer:

Cheap grace “is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury, from which she shows blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits.”²

Some people think that since Jesus paid the price for our sins by dying on a cross, we can do whatever we want. According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace means preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance. Cheap grace is communion without confession.

“Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”³

I chose our scripture for this morning because Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about its meaning in his book. Here’s my copy of *The Cost of Discipleship*. On the inside cover, I signed my name, Laurie Hartzel, as many of us do in our books. Then I wrote May 5, 1976. I bought this book a month before I graduated from college. It was a period when I was wrestling with my own call, wondering where God was leading me.

As I opened the book, which is old and started falling apart, I noticed that I had underlined a lot in the section where Bonhoeffer talks about our scripture, which is about three people who sincerely want to follow Jesus.

When the first man says, “I’ll follow you wherever you go,” Jesus responds, “Well, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Still interested?” According to Bonhoeffer, this first man offers to follow Jesus without waiting to be

called by Jesus. Jesus, in turn, dampens his enthusiasm by warning him what he's in for, namely taking up his cross as Jesus did. Bonhoeffer writes:

“No one can choose such a life for himself.”⁴

You and I cannot lead a life of true discipleship without being undergirded by the costly grace of Jesus Christ, which always comes first. The call comes through grace. To the second man, Jesus says, “Follow me.” Jesus can sense that he's sincere and willing and actually calls him to follow. But the man is bound by the demands of the law. He says, “Okay, I'll come, but my father just died, and I have to bury him first. It's my responsibility.” Jesus replies, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Bonhoeffer writes:

“At this critical moment nothing on earth, however sacred, must be allowed to come between Jesus and the man he has called — not even the law itself.”⁵

The third man, like the first, thinks he needs to make the offer on his own initiative, as if it were a career he was choosing. But this guy goes a bit further and stipulates his own terms. He says, “I'll follow you. All I have to do is say goodbye to my family.” Bonhoeffer says that for the third man, discipleship is a possibility but only when certain conditions have been fulfilled. And Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. Still wanna go?” Grace is costly, Bonhoeffer writes, because it calls us to follow.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a splendid career ahead of him as a professor, writer and theologian. All of that changed, however, when Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. Bonhoeffer realized right away that National Socialism was “an attempt to make history without God.” Already in 1933 he denounced on Berlin radio a political system that corrupted and grossly misled a nation and made the “Fuehrer” its idol and god. The broadcast was cut off before he finished.

In October 1933 Bonhoeffer left Germany and pastored several congregations in England, attempting to convince everyone he knew to recognize what was going on in Germany. Two years later Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to direct an illegal Church Training College in Finkenwalde where young men headed for the ministry attempted to live in Christian community. It was kind of like a Protestant monastery.

By 1939, American friends got him out of Germany, but within months Bonhoeffer felt called to return to his country. He could not desert his persecuted fellow Christians in his homeland. He wrote to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

“I shall 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 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 our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this choice in security... I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America.”⁶

Several things stood out to me this summer as I read Charles Marsh's magnificent 2014 biography of Bonhoeffer. First, Bonhoeffer insisted that the church was called to responsible action as exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount. Faith can only be understood in community because Christ is found in the embodied lives of Christians.

In Bonhoeffer's view, by embracing the Third Reich, the German Lutheran Church capitulated to Hitler. The German church not only claimed that God chose a new Israel, the German people, but they even convinced themselves that Jesus was not a Jew. Therefore, it was okay to exterminate the Jews.

For Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther's insistence that the only thing that saves us is our faith, not works, was twisted by the German church into a rationale for not picking up the cross and following Jesus by how we live our lives. *Sola Fide*, only faith, does not imply lazy piety or abstract intellectualism. Conscience and conduct go together. Charles Marsh wrote:

“For Bonhoeffer dogmatic proclamation would never be enough, and he believed that every confession of Christ as Lord must bear concretely on the immediate work of peace. Obedience could not be separated from confession. The kingdom of heaven does not suffer lip service.”⁷

Out of Bonhoeffer's conviction that every Christian is called to responsible action came an eventual shift in his thinking about resistance to Hitler and the Third Reich. In his early years Bonhoeffer struggled with a Christian ethic of war. He did not hold the common belief that killing on behalf of the Fatherland was an act of love for Germans. In 1934, when Bonhoeffer was asked what he would do if Germany declared war on the Allies, he replied:

“I pray that God will give me the strength not to take up arms.”⁸

Bonhoeffer was a pacifist at this point and declared that Christians could not participate in war except for the ambulance corps. He was drawn to the nonviolent resistance movement through the Confessing Church, which broke off from the state Lutheran Church, but he paid a great price. Bonhoeffer was banished from the university even while having two doctorates and watched unqualified Nazi puppets take his place. He was prohibited from preaching, then speaking in public, then banned from Berlin itself.

In 1938 Bonhoeffer aligned himself with the secular resistance movement because the Confessing Church failed to stay the course. Although he was never directly implicated in any of the more than a hundred plots to kill Hitler, Bonhoeffer prayed for the defeat of his country and gave his blessing to those conspiring to murder Hitler. He was also a double agent for a time, serving as a German military intelligence officer as well as a courier diplomat to the British government.

As Bonhoeffer pondered these difficult ethical questions he wrote:

“Might extreme actions be required of morally responsible people in extraordinary circumstances and extreme cases?”⁹

“How is it that Christians gave in and secular people exercised brave defiance?”

“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was never sorry for returning to his homeland, where he worked for the political underground and had a strong spiritual influence on the opposition movement. Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo along with one of his sisters and her husband on April 5, 1943. In prison he inspired everyone by his courage, unselfishness and goodness. His guards respected Bonhoeffer so much that they smuggled out his poems and writings. Even though he struggled intensely at times, Bonhoeffer’s fellow prisoners were deeply affected by his calm and self-control, even in the most horrible situations.

How was Bonhoeffer able to endure? In December 1943 Bonhoeffer published a paper, smuggled out from prison, called “The Last Ten Years: A Reckoning Made at New Year 1943.” Eloquent and unnerving all at the same time, Bonhoeffer wrote:

“Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call.”¹⁰

Bonhoeffer lived out his very words. On October 5, 1944, he was transferred from Tegel to the main Gestapo prison in Berlin, thereafter losing outside contact with the world. In February 1945, Bonhoeffer was taken to the concentration camp at Buchenwald and then to other prisons until he was finally hanged at Flossenburg by a special order from Himmler because of his complicity in a plot to kill Hitler. It was April 9, 1945, just a few days before the camp was liberated by the Allies.

Though none go with me, still I will follow; Though none go with me, still I will follow; Though none go with me, still I will follow; no turning back, no turning back.

God granted Bonhoeffer “costly grace,” the privilege of taking up the cross for others and affirming his faith through martyrdom so that his country could eventually be rebuilt and dedicate itself to lasting peace. The path Bonhoeffer chose is not necessarily our path. He came to see that it is our Christian duty to oppose a government that is tyrannical and acts in ways contrary to the law of love as seen in the life of Jesus. If self-sacrifice for the sake of responsible love is at the heart of the Christian life, then Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the greatest martyrs in Christian history.

Not all are inspired and willing to do what Bonhoeffer did. But we all called to follow Christ. Are you willing to give up cheap grace and follow Jesus? What will it cost you to recognize that the mark of true discipleship is often sacrifice and suffering? Are you willing to die to yourself

and live for Christ? Are you willing to accept that the cost of discipleship means that nothing can come between Christ and ourselves — not the law, not politics, not nationalism, not family, not job, nothing?

***Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!***

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1963, p. 45.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 47.

⁴ Ibid, p. 65.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, p. 16.

⁷ Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, p. 225.

⁸ Ibid, p. 213.

⁹ Ibid, p. 313.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York, Macmillan, p. 77.