

“Discipleship,” by Rev. Dr. Mark J.T. Caggiano, 11/9/25

Job 19:23-27a; Luke 20:27-38

O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!

Job is calling out with his complaints so that someone will listen, so that someone will take seriously his words. Perhaps if they were written down in a book that would happen. Perhaps if he had carved the words into stone, someone would have taken heed.

This is in response to one of his friends, Bildad, who has been telling Job that the evil will be punished and the good will be rewarded. That is the way of the world and yet Job’s complaints run against that understanding of the world. Good will triumph, evil will perish. It is that simple. And that is why Job was being punished, so he needed to repent whatever it was that he had done.

And Job feels that he was being ignored by his friends, because he was being ignored. But the more important question might be whether he was being ignored by *God*. Job said: *For I know that my vindicator lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*

If the word “vindicator” sounds like a word for a courtroom more than a church, you would not be misguided. The language used by Job throughout the book is like that from a legal trial, as if he stood before a judge, because that is exactly what he wants to see happen. He wants God to answer his pleas, to respond to his situation, and to offer judgement on behalf of Job who is suffering for no good reason in Job’s estimation.

The Book of Job famously confounds our expectations. The expectation that good people are blessed and bad people are punished. That the world is a mechanistic place of blessings and punishments handed out accordingly to those whose behavior warrants such offerings.

And yet, we are confronted with a world in which bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. And there is no readily discernable technique for predicting what will happen. Of course, some people deeply believe that there is a system in place, something like the notion of karma, something like the day-to-day judgments of God.

Well Job, you must have done something wrong to warrant what has happened. Confess your sins and God might forgive you. His friends were repeatedly telling him he had sinned against God, because that is what they believe stood at the source of all suffering: *sin*. But Job insisted otherwise.

And we the readers are told that this indeed was not the case, that this was a test of Job who was blameless. A test of whether he would curse God as soon as he stopped receiving all those blessings. That certainly upends any claim of a mechanistic system, a push and pull of rewards and punishments. Because under a *testing* system, rather than one of reward and punishment, bad things can happen to good people. And sometimes, it seems, that bad people can get away with quite a lot.

This fall we have been exploring certain religious figures on Sunday. And so today, we are considering the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Lutheran pastor, a German theologian. He lived during the early 20th century and died in 1945.

And for those students of history out there, the death of a German figure in 1945 was likely tied to a certain event, the conclusion of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer has been arrested for involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. And for those actions, he was executed days before the end of the war in Europe. And, by the way, *he did it*. Bonhoeffer did indeed plot against Hitler and his terrible regime. But before we consider any of that, let us consider who Dietrich Bonhoeffer was.

He was born into an educated family, his father Karl being a physician and psychiatrist who criticized the works of Sigmund Freud. His mother Paula was a teacher who came from a family of Protestant theologians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer never married, though he was engaged to the granddaughter of one of his benefactors.

Dietrich's entry into a life of ministry was not welcomed by his family, who were perhaps more academic, more secular in their outlooks. Indeed, Bonhoeffer began with similar intellectual goals, but over time he became more focused on his vocation than his education and tried to live a life patterned after that of Jesus in the Gospels.

As a young man, Bonhoeffer also became an opponent of Nazism. Days after Hitler came into power, a 27 year old Bonhoeffer made a radio address denouncing the regime. His broadcast was quickly terminated but his opposition did not.

Bonhoeffer tried to fight the Nazification of the German churches, with a few successes but mostly defeats. Hitler did not accept fair episcopal elections and, after one humiliating election lost, had his unqualified but faithful servant appointed bishop of the German church, one unified forcefully by the Nazis.

Around that time, Bonhoeffer traveled to England to do ecumenical work, but that was mostly a cover for his efforts to oppose Hitler and to prepare for Germany's post-Nazi period. He returned to Germany to lead an underground seminary that prepared ministers to serve in what was called the Confessing Church, a dissenting church designed to oppose the new nationalistic church as well as its political sponsors. The Nazis opposed this work and eventually closed the school.

On the eve of war in Europe, Bonhoeffer took two significant steps. He joined the Abwehr, a German military intelligence service. This was perhaps a preemptive step, one designed to avoid serving in a combat unit, due to Bonhoeffer's pacifistic beliefs. By the way, being a pacifist was considered treason in Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer also traveled to the United States to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He therefore had a different opportunity to avoid the burdens of war back home. But after a while, he decided he had no choice but to return to Germany.

He wrote the famous German-American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1939:

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 along 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 a future Christian civilization may survive, or else willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization and any true Christianity. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from a place of security.

As a member of German military intelligence, Bonhoeffer also became aware of the Final Solution, the decision to eliminate all Jews from Germany and across Europe. In the face of these unfolding atrocities, he concluded, "the ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself from this whole affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to survive and live for Truth."

And so, he returned to Germany and his likely death.

How then did a religious man, a self-proclaimed pacifist who sought to follow the life and lessons of Jesus Christ, justify his involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler? I will skip over the fascinating details on that plot as I can only inflict so much history upon you on any given Sunday.

Bonhoeffer did not justify his actions, writing: "When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, he imputes his guilt to himself and no one else. He answers for it... Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace."

Grace would be one of the pivotal words in Bonhoeffer's life and in his most well-known theological works, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He made a distinction between two forms of grace: *cheap grace* and *costly grace*.

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. [...]

“[Conversely] Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son...”

In this sense, Bonhoeffer thought that Christians relied too much on the notions of Christ’s sacrifice and God’s forgiveness and therefore they would not challenge themselves to follow the teachings of Jesus and the expectations of God. This is a critique against many threads of Protestant theology, which heavily rely upon the notion of *sola fide*, or salvation through faith alone.

Salvation without regard for good works in the world. Salvation without any effort because Jesus already did everything for us. Bonhoeffer lifted up his more costly version of grace as being consistent with the teachings of Jesus and would therefore mark us as disciples rather than merely Christians.

Merely Christians—those would be fighting words in many buildings that look like this one. Merely Christians because the label is enough to get you across the great finish line in the sky.

That is of course one of the foundational questions of religion: what do you need to do to be saved? Do you need to do good works in the world? Do you need to have faith and faith alone? Do you need to do nothing because whether you have been saved was decided long ago?

And I will add my own qualification to this question: What does one need to do to be saved and is being saved the only thing that matters in life?

Bonhoeffer once preached in a sermon: *"The blood of martyrs might once again be demanded, but this blood, if we really have the courage and loyalty to shed it, will not be innocent, shining like that of the first witnesses for the faith. On our blood lies heavy with guilt, the guilt of the unprofitable servant who is cast into outer darkness."*

The interesting thing about that sermon was that it was preached in 1932. That was during the time when Bonhoeffer shifted from being a proud and nationalist German to a pacifist, one who would embrace the Sermon on the Mount and its call to become peacemakers. And even this pacifist was willing to take on the stain of sin and the threat of final judgment, by abandoning the role of peacemaker in the plot to kill Hitler.

As Bonhoeffer once wrote, *"Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace."* Bonhoeffer placed his hope in the grace of God even as struggled with dire necessity of his circumstances and the contours of his personal conscience.

In the Book of Job, Job was calling out for vindication, believing that his redeemer lives. Why must I suffer? How can God allow bad things to happen to good people? And, by implication, how can God allow bad people to thrive, to succeed, or even to rule the world?

Bonhoeffer in a sense was like Job, though never proclaiming he was sinless like Job. He lived in a time when terrible things were happening to blameless people: to the Jews of Europe, to Jehovah’s Witnesses, to Catholic priests and nuns who opposed the regime, and many, many others.

Bonhoeffer did not sit idly by. He spoke out, he acted out, he sought out those who might help. He struggled to retain his conscience even as he chose to act in ways at odds with his faith. For example, we must assume that his actions in German military intelligence were for some period deemed useful by the German authorities and therefore useful to meet their policies and goals. We can only guess how that intelligence was used against people.

We must also assume that Bonhoeffer's work with German intelligence officials was a compromise of his ethics even if the intent was to meet a higher moral propose. Like Jacob by the riverside wrestling with angels, like the very name Israel which means one who struggles with God, Bonhoeffer had to navigate a time and a society that we can only imagine.

Though, I am guessing, some might indeed imagine the story of Bonhoeffer and his experiences in Germany as being a closer reminder of the present than many of us might like. But I digress.

Jesus frequently taught his disciples through stories. And those stories became the basis for many of the lessons in Christian thought. In any good story, you are drawn to place yourself in it, to identify with one character or another. In the Good Samaritan, there are times we might feel ourselves to be the victim, the poor man robbed and beaten by the side of the road. Then again, we might place ourselves in the role of the Samaritan, the good guy, the one who teaches us the lesson of being a truly good neighbor.

But we might less often place ourselves in the role of the two men who walked by, leaving the man to die by the side of the road. The priest and the Levite who likely thought the man was dead and therefore did not want to ritually pollute themselves by touching a corpse. That is the charitable version, one that does not paint them as cowardly or lazy or selfish. And certainly no one places themselves in the role of the robber, the evildoer, the one who caused it all to happen.

How might we slot ourselves into the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Who might we be? We could be his family, the academic, secular folks who did not like his choice of a life in ministry. We could be his co-conspirators, those who worked behind the scenes against the Nazis at the risk of their lives. We could be the opposition, the German resistance, the rebels hiding in the dark corners of society waiting for a chance.

We would never be the Nazis, the men and women who chose authoritarianism over freedom. Who chose racial purity over diversity, equity, or inclusion. Who chose to weld together nationalism and religion into a muscular form of religious patriotism. I am guessing we would *never* identify with them.

We are not those terrible people in our minds' eye within a story. But usually, no one is. No one takes on the role of the robber or the fascist and yet we live in a world that contains robbers and fascists. Maybe they just do not hang out in church.

But if we were to place ourselves into the story, into the situation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, what would we do? What would we do if the nation around us came to embrace authoritarianism? What would we do if secret police walked our streets and arrested our neighbors? What would we do if our government required loyalty to a leader without a concern for our rights and our freedom?

What would we do if people under the banner of Christianity rejected the Sermon on the Mount and the Twofold Commandment to love God and to love one another? Smothering the life, lessons, and meaning of Jesus Christ under thunderous proclamations of faith and showy forms of public prayer? What would that look like? What would that sound like?

And what would we do?

Would we be like the priest and the Levite walking on by to avoid getting involved? Would we be like the Good Samaritan? Remembering that Samaritans were social pariahs and outcasts who were openly hated by their neighbors for what they represented. Hated by people like the priest and the Levite, by all the proper folks in society. And yet the Good Samaritan in the story is the one who helped lavishly and selflessly.

Would we be Bonhoeffer openly and repeatedly standing up to fight against a violent regime? Placing himself at risk even when he had the opportunity to be safe and far away from the events. Would we wring our hands in private and stay silent in public? Would we stand in the way of those secret police as they carried away our neighbors? Would we stand up and shout that this is wrong?

What would we do?

I have thrown a lot of questions at you this morning, questions that I need to answer for myself. But in that hypothetical story in which an unjust society needs to be confronted by those with the voice, power, and privilege to do so, it is worth considering the life, lessons, and meaning of Jesus Christ. A man who was executed for opposing power and opposing those who ruled.

Bonhoeffer did not want to die, I am sure. But he also did not think he could live without turning his hands to the work of saving his country and his people from the injustices they were facing and the horrors that were unfolding.

In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.”

And so, let us seek out the grace of God—a gift that must be pursued and a pathway that must be followed.

Amen.