

Pentecost XI
Romans 7:15-25a and Bonhoeffer reading
August 16, 2020
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Before March of 2020 if you and I ran into each other on the street, we might ask, “How are you?” and answer “I am doing fine” or “Gosh, I am busy.” These days we are not running into each other on sidewalks but in chat rooms and the question is more likely to be “How are you holding up?” or “Is everyone staying healthy in your household?” Instead of busyness we are fighting fatigue: Zoom fatigue, quarantine fatigue, perhaps even Netflix-streaming fatigue. Under fatigue, I believe, lies grief; a lament for the many lives have been lost, so many lives altered, irrevocably. At our first Wednesday evening prayer service, I lost my place when leading Holy Communion, right in the middle of the prayer. I chalked it up to being out of practice until it happened a second time. Again, my brain froze, unsure of the next line, right in the middle of a liturgy I have led for over twenty years. Here was my body’s signal that I was sadder than I realized; separated from those practices that offer shape and meaning in tangible form to our faith.

The final weeks of summer are typically a time to soak up some last visits to the pool, host a farewell backyard BBQ, or take a mini-vacation. Instead it’s staycations or no vacations, another day the same as yesterday, and the growing acceptance of a largely quarantined fall. Lament is also a longing. Here we share a longing for something better, stronger to emerge from this struggle even if the contours of that tender hope for something better is still taking shape.

Throughout August, Grace’s sermons are delving into Paul’s Letter to the Romans, journeying through this grand theological treatise about the saving work of Jesus Christ. Paired with this towering missive is the monumental witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, giant of the church, resistor within Nazi Germany, martyr of our faith who gave to us an example of the cost of discipleship. Although familiar with Bonhoeffer’s work, it has been a number of years since I’ve read it closely, and something of the crucible of our present day has propelled me toward exploring his life again in order to understand more about this courageous Christian, who managed almost from his beginning to discern the distinction between the seemingly Christian who gives lip service to Christ and the committed disciple, who moves steadily toward a Christ- or cross-shaped life. Bonhoeffer’s time was uniquely his. But his courage, his clarity, and his capacity to hold Christ at his center has something to teach us today.

Bonhoeffer was the sixth of eight children, born just before his twin sister. His father was a prominent neurologist and psychiatrist, his mother equally esteemed. His family settled in Berlin, and were comfortable, even affluent and – notably – only nominally religious. God’s call on Bonhoeffer’s life appeared early. He was 14 when he announced to his family his intention to study theology and be ordained. His educational work toward becoming a professor and a pastor unfolded alongside Hitler’s rise to power and the beginnings of Nazi Germany. Nazism required pastors to make an oath to Hitler and to provide evidence of one’s Aryan lineage. Alarmed by such laws, Bonhoeffer and others formed the Confessing Church, a collection of

churches who broke from the official state church to make a public confession of their sole allegiance to Jesus Christ. Despite this initial boldness, the Confessing Church would struggle in the face of Nazi aggression, maintaining at times what has been characterized as a dishonorable silence about the persecution of Jews as well as a preoccupation with their internal wellbeing, focused on finances, recognition, and their future. When witnessing these self-protective acts, Bonhoeffer chastises his Christian brothers and sisters, “indicting the church for having buried Jesus in a repelling heap of religiosity.”¹ Jesus, it is clear, is very real to Bonhoeffer. Jesus is not an abstract concept summarized by words like Incarnation, Atonement or Resurrection, but the very presence of God living alongside fleshly, fallable human beings, not defeated by silence, cowardice nor the evil of a repressive regime. In an early sermon, Bonhoeffer proclaims, “God wanders among us in human form, speaking to us in those who cross our paths, be they stranger, beggar, sick, or even in those nearest to us in everyday life, becoming Christ’s demand on our faith in him.”

By virtue of his experience with atrocities of war, death camps, church timidity and then Christ’s presence, Bonhoeffer could have easily identified with the chasm Paul is drawing between God’s goodness and human’s sin in Romans, chapter 7. Attempting to describe the sinful state in which humankind finds itself again and again, Paul writes “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Here Paul is not talking about sins with a small “s” – those individual mistakes, failures or omissions that we commit. Nor is Paul talking about the sum of all the little sins accumulated across a lifetime, or all of humankind. Paul is describing sin with a capital S – that “active, aggressive power that it is beyond us, which can take even the good we intend to do and twist it toward death.”² All of us are caught in this sinful web of distortions, betrayals, self-deceptions, and, yes, evil.

Paul knows this Sinful state himself, having been raised a devout, religious man, intent upon maintaining the Torah - that set of laws given by God for life’s preservation. Yet he finds his zeal for keeping God’s law turns him into one who is “breathing threats and murders” against Jesus’ disciples. (Acts 9:1) No wonder Paul now can say “I did not know what I was actually doing.” Yet in these verses Paul isn’t just talking about himself. He is summing up the history of Israel, the people of God, who are given commandments to follow, who pray in the psalms “I love your law, Lord,” and yet finds themselves, again and again, in a sin-filled state: making golden calves, bowing down to other gods, attacking foreign countries, fighting internally, and living in a valley of dry bones. And really, it is not just Israel, one community, of which Paul writes but the state of humankind, all of Adam and Eve’s descendents, for we, too, struggle with a propensity toward selfishness, weakness, hate, and destroying others. O God, says one prayer of confession, “our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo.”

¹Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, revised edition, Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 8.

²Smith, Ted A., “Theologian Perspective on Romans 7:15-25a” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Vol 3, David L. Martlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2011), 208.

Perhaps, at an earlier season, you and I would have said, we are doing pretty good. We aim to be good citizens, dedicated employees, faithful spouses, hardworking parents, loyal friends. We might say we thought we were doing what was required, running here and there, managing careers, households, social obligations, charitable efforts, and making sure we have some time for a little play. The economy is strong; the neighborhood is delightful, my kids' future path looks open. But the pandemic and George Floyd's death have exposed the deathliness existing underneath all the good we thought we were doing, it has laid bare the fissures contained in our way of life. At one point we might have been able to claim ignorance – I didn't know – but now we cannot. The pandemic, writes Frank Bruni, is not only a public health crisis and an economic crisis . . . it is also a values crisis. It raises all kinds of deep human questions: what are our responsibilities to other people?"³

This is Sin; it is bigger than you and me, more pervasive than we imagined. We cannot rescue ourselves. To attempt to do so, says Karl Barth, is like trying to pull ourselves out of a swamp by our own hair. And yet, we are not left alone, unaided. What a wretched human I am, Paul confesses, and yet there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The Spirit of life that is God in Christ has set you free. How is it that Christ finds us; rescues us and sets us free?

Even before witnessing the horrors of Nazi persecution, Bonhoeffer felt compelled toward the isolated "little ones" who experienced rejection, isolation, or suffering. He came to find Christ there in their midst. Looking back on his life from prison, he writes, "I learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled, in short, from the perspective of those who suffer." There is a message for us, brothers and sisters in Christ, about where to find Christ in the grief we experience and the suffering happening around us. Look below. Walk beside the hungry, sick, persecuted, the weary, and the ones who do not think they can make it another day. And if you are one of those who is facing hunger, illness, and desperation, know that Christ is there, in his deepest form, and here the community that is Christ's body today finds its work. We have no future unless it is bound to the suffering ones, just as it was in bearing the weight of our sinfulness and all its rippling effects, that Christ set us free.

Bonhoeffer wrote a poem entitled "Who Am I" from prison in 1944, a year before he died. It begins: "Who am I – they often tell me I would step from my prison cell poised, cheerful and sturdy, speaking to my guests freely, pleasantly, firmly." In the next stanza he turned the question inward. "What I know of myself is that I am restless, yearning, sick, like a bird in its cage, hungering for colors, for flowers, for the songs of birds, thirsting for kind words and human closeness. Who am I ... they mock me these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, you know me, O God, You know I am yours."

³ Bruni, Frank. "The New York Times," June 7, 2020.

