

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on February 7, 2021.

### DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: CONFESSION

***Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; According to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Psalm 51:1-2***

Today we continue our series on men and women who illumine for us some special aspect of our Christian faith. Today we focus on a man Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis near the end of World War II. His story centers on the great events of the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After learning about his life and work we will focus on the role that confession played in his spiritual life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4 in 1906 in a town which was then in German Prussia but is today a city in Poland. He was born into a very accomplished family. His father, Karl, was a psychiatrist and neurologist who was noted for his criticism of Sigmund Freud. His mother Paula was a teacher and the granddaughter of a Protestant theologian and a noted painter. The Bonhoeffer family encouraged education and accomplishment. His oldest brother Karl became a chemist, and, along with Paul Harteck, discovered the spin isomers of hydrogen in 1929. Walter Bonhoeffer, the second born of the family, was killed in action during World War I, when Dietrich and his twin sister were 12. The family encouraged achievements across many disciplines and generations. Dietrich's nephew was director of the Cleveland Symphony from 1984 to 2002.

Bonhoeffer received a theological education at Tübingen and Berlin. When he completed his PHD, he came to America for some post-graduate work at Union in New York City. One of his classmates exposed him to the black church experience. He came to have a life-long love of spirituals.

He returned to Germany, was ordained in 1931 and became lecturer of systematic theology in Berlin. Dietrich was well on his way to having a traditional academic and ecclesial career.

Then two things happened to change the direction of his life. Bonhoeffer had a conversion experience which caused him to move from an intellectual affirmation of Christian ideas to actually practicing his faith. He began to put what he talked about and taught into action. This is when he began to read the Bible, pray and regularly attend worship.

The second reality that would change Bonhoeffer's life was the Nazi ascension to power on January 30, 1933. He was a determined opponent of the regime from its first days. Two days after Hitler was installed as Chancellor, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address in which he attacked Hitler and warned Germany against slipping into an idolatrous cult of the *Führer*. He was cut off the air in the middle of a sentence, though it is unclear whether the newly elected Nazi regime was responsible. In April 1933, Bonhoeffer raised the first voice for church resistance to Hitler's persecution of Jews, declaring that the church must not simply "bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam a spoke in the wheel itself."

During the early years of the Nazi movement Bonhoeffer worked with others who opposed the Nazi take over of the church. He became part of the confessing church movement that operated independent of the state church which was controlled by the party. He helped to form underground seminaries that trained men to serve this unofficial church.

During the 1930's he spent time serving a German congregation in England and made another trip to America. In 1939 he was invited to teach at Union Seminary in New York. He could have waited out the war in security. He arrived in New York but only stayed a few weeks. He later wrote:

**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 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 Christian Civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security.**

So, he returned to Germany to continue the struggle. He was recruited by dissident members of German intelligence to create contacts with Christian groups in other countries. There were factions in German intelligence who conspired to overthrow Hitler and make peace. Even though he had been a lifelong pacifist, Bonhoeffer became part of the plan to kill Hitler to save Germany.

In 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo and put into prison. For a year and a half, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned at Tegel Prison awaiting trial. There he continued his work in religious outreach among his fellow prisoners and guards. Sympathetic guards helped smuggle his letters out of prison to his friends. These uncensored letters were posthumously published in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. One of those guards, a corporal named Knobloch, even offered to help him escape from the prison and "disappear" with him, and plans were made for that end. Bonhoeffer declined the offer, fearing Nazi retribution against his family, especially his brother Klaus and brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi, who were also imprisoned.

In July of 1944 a bomb went off at a meeting of the German High command. It failed to take out Hitler. This failure set off a series of reprisals. Papers were found that implicated Bonhoeffer. On April 9, 1945 Bonhoeffer was put to death by hanging at Flossenburg Concentration Camp. One witness reported the dignity of his death in these words:

**"I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor; I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life might illumine several aspects of our faith. Today may we look at just one. One that enabled him to stand for truth even when it ultimately cost him his life. When Bonhoeffer moved from being merely an intellectual Christian to a person who practiced his faith, he took up regular confession. One writer claims this was his secret weapon. Confession helped to shape his entire life.

Confession helped Bonhoeffer to receive grace as a costly gift from God. He once wrote:

**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.**

In confessing his sins in public and private, Bonhoeffer came to deeply understand Jesus' sacrifice for him. We learn important lessons about prayers of confession from the Bible.

First, Confession is not the way we let God in on our secret sins, but rather our facing up to the reality about ourselves.

We sometime act as if when we confess our sins, we are informing God of things God does not know about. We talk as if our sins were only something we know about. Often, we read our Old Testament Lesson from Genesis in this way. After he has eaten of the fruit Adam hides himself. God calls out to him, "Where are you?" We often take this to be a game of hide and seek in the Garden of Eden. This question does not mean God does not know where Adam is. God asked the question of Adam, "Where are you?" It is Adam who does not know where he is. Because of his sin, it is Adam who is lost. Sin blinds us to reality. We cannot know who we really are.

King David did not recognize all his misdeeds while he was in the midst of them. His desires kept him from realizing what he was doing. It was only when confronted by Nathan that David could completely take responsibility for his actions. It was in the naming of his failings that he could write **For I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me.**

The poet Robert Burns was attending church one Sunday. Seated in front of him was a woman all dressed up in her finery. She had her hair done up in one of the high styles' fashionable in the 18th century. While the service went on, he noticed that in the midst of her perfectly coiffed hair there was a louse crawling around. She felt that everything was perfect, but there for all to see was the louse.

Burns meditated on this sight in his poem **To A Louse** which contains these words:

**O wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see ourselves as ithers see us!**

Prayers of confession give us the power to see ourselves as others do. When we spend time in prayer naming our sins, we come to see ourselves as we really are. In naming our failings we take responsibility for that which we have done wrong in our lives. We become accountable for our actions and failures. We are in effect saying we are men and women who are not victims of fate, but responsible human beings who have failed to live up to God's intentions for us.

The first lesson we learn is that when we daily confess to God that which we have done wrong each day we face up to the reality of who we are.

The second lesson we learn is that prayers of confession also enable us to experience the grace of Christ. The forgiveness of God is always available to us. Jesus died on the cross for all our sins. We can do nothing to earn forgiveness from God. The gift of grace comes to us free from our loving father. Yet we do not always know that forgiveness. It is through prayers of confession that we come to experience that grace.

Bonhoeffer tells us that our lack of confession keeps us from experiencing grace. He wrote:

**You are disobedient, you are trying to keep some part of your life under your own control. That is what is preventing you from listening to Christ and believing in his grace. You cannot hear Christ because you are willfully disobedient. Somewhere in your heart you are refusing to listen to his call. Your difficulty is your sins.**

It is through prayers of confession that we become open to that sense of relief and joy at our sins being removed from us.

We experience forgiveness in different ways. At times when we acknowledge our sins, we feel dirty. Clearly King David experienced his sin as making him soiled. In his prayer of confession, he asked God to:

**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean  
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

David felt that his sins had covered him with dirt, and he needed to be washed. Often Old Testament people would cover themselves with ashes as a sign of repentance. The ashes represented on the body an acknowledgement of the state of their soul.

One of the sacraments of the Christian Church is baptism. Baptism is a symbolic washing. It does not matter if one is baptized in a river, or with water on the forehead from a font, it is ritual bath. In washing the outside of the body, we realize the Christ is present cleansing our souls. Baptism reminds us of the power of Jesus to cleanse us from all sin.

There are times we all pray **Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; According to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.**

At other times we experience our sin as a great burden. I do not know about you, but many times the knowledge of my having hurt someone affects my body. I often feel it as a heavy weight upon my back which makes life a burden. It can make my stomach turn into knots. Our feelings of guilt can cause our spirits to sag and take almost all joy out of life.

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus has taken our sin on his back on the cross. He takes the punishment for us and says **Come unto me all you who are overburdened, and I will give you rest.** Jesus promises to take away our sin and restore us to his love.

Each day of our lives we commit sins. Everyday of our lives we do things and say things of which we are ashamed. Each day we hurt others. Each day we fail to do something God would have us do. This truth can at times burden and make us feel unlovable, and unworthy.

We need each day to confess our sins. We need to tell God how we have failed, to face the truth of who we are. If we do, we open ourselves to experiencing the peace and joy which Christ can give. We come to know the joy of forgiveness. Confession helps us grow in faith and holiness.

On Sundays in worship together and privately in daily prayer we need confession. It reminds us of who we are and opens us to God's forgiveness and love. Name your failings and grace will make you whole. Each day follow the example of David who prayed **Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; According to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.**