

Faith Story: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

As I work on this summer series of Faith Stories, each week I find myself feeling more and more guilty about trying to squeeze a rich, complicated, faithful life into a couple of minutes in the middle of a worship service. Please don't misunderstand me -- I still like this idea and have very much enjoyed doing the research on each of the Christian lives we've looked at. But this week, in trying to prepare a Faith Story on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I have been sharply aware of what a superficial, inadequate glance this is at a life which has been written about in numerous biographies and theological reflections, brought to life in dramatic re-enactments, and looked to for guidance and inspiration by millions of people over the last seventy years.



Perhaps part of the difficulty this week is that, unlike our previous Christian figures, Bonhoeffer is close to us in time, having lived in the 20th century. In addition to that historic proximity, he was a prolific author, so there is simply more information available to teach us about who he was, what he believed, and how he lived out those convictions. Another challenge in considering Bonhoeffer's faith story is that his execution by the Nazis is such a huge and overwhelming event that the tragic ending of his life can become the only thing we remember clearly about him.

But let's step back from the end of Bonhoeffer's life to its beginning and place a few of the bricks into the road of faith that led him ultimately to the gallows in Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Bonhoeffer was a twin. He and his sister Sabina, born in 1906, were the sixth and seventh children in a well-connected, highly regarded family that later added one more son. His father was a prominent professor of psychiatry and neurology at Berlin University; his mother was a daughter of the preacher at the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The Bonhoeffer family was erudite and accomplished, but not particularly religious, and when Dietrich announced at age 14 that he intended to become a minister and theologian, his family was not especially pleased. Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer did study theology and received his doctorate from Berlin University when he was 21. Over the next years, he was ordained as a Lutheran pastor, served churches in Barcelona and London, and spent a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he attended and taught Sunday School at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. His introduction to the fervor and social consciousness of the Harlem church and his experience of studying ethics under Reinhold Niebuhr were deeply influential on the course he charted in his thinking and his actions over the coming years.

Bonhoeffer returned from the US to Germany just as Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were coming into power, and he immediately began speaking out, urging his fellow Lutherans to reject as idolatry the Nazi claim that the Fuhrer and the state were owed allegiance above that owed to God. He became a leading spokesman for the Confessing Church, which was the center of

German Protestant resistance to the Nazi regime and produced the Declaration of Barmen, which is included in our Book of Confessions.

Between 1935 and 1940, Bonhoeffer was involved with a Confessing Church seminary at Finkenwald, which continued in disguised form after the political authorities prohibited virtually all the activities of the Confessing Church and officially closed all its seminaries in 1937. There was a point in 1939 when Bonhoeffer considered removing himself from the national crisis in Germany and taking refuge in the US, but after only two weeks in New York, he returned to Germany on one of the last civilian ships to make the journey across the Atlantic, writing to Reinhold Niebuhr that “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.”

Bonhoeffer realized that, though he respected pacifism and non-violence and would choose them if he could, the actions and intentions of Hitler and the Nazis had to be resisted. His theology and his ethics led him to the conviction that, as he put it: “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” Bonhoeffer signed up with the German secret service and worked as a double agent. While traveling to church conferences around Europe, his assignment was to collect information about the places he visited; instead he worked to help Jews escape and he sought Allied support for the German resistance.

In 1943, after the discovery of evidence that linked him to a plot to overthrow the government and assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer was arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to execution. He spent two years in prison, corresponding with family and friends, pastoring fellow prisoners, and reflecting on the meaning of “Jesus Christ for today”. He continued to develop his theology during this time and his prison writings of both prose and poetry remain deeply important to the Christian church.

On April 9, 1945, one month before Germany surrendered, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenbürg extermination camp.

I am not able, in three or four short sentences, to explain or even outline Bonhoeffer’s theology, which people have rightly spent careers studying. I will say that his is a deeply Christological theology, focused on how following Christ leads us to actions which serve our neighbor. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christianity finds great, perhaps paramount, significance in the Incarnation, the act of God becoming human to dwell among humans in order that humanity and creation might be saved. God thereby entered into humanity’s *suffering* and we most truly express our faith and our obedience by participating in the sufferings of God in the secular life of the world, not for the sake of suffering itself, but for the sake of solidarity with and justice for the poor, afflicted, and oppressed.

One of Bonhoeffer’s best-known books is *Life Together*, written as both chronical of and reflection on his experience at the seminary in Finkenwald. In the first chapter, he writes: *Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this. ... [This] means, first, that a Christian needs others for the sake of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian*

comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time, and united for eternity. (p. 31) The goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation. (p. 32) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in all that he wrote and all that he did and all that he was, brings the message of salvation. He offers us a powerful, faithful witness to both the call and the cost of discipleship.

Works Consulted:

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- *Dangerous Prayers: 50 Powerful Prayers that Changed the World*; published by Thomas Nelson; p. 20-24
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- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich; *Life Together*
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich; *Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible*
- *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prison Poems*; edited and translated by Edwin Robertson
- *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Called by God*; Elizabeth Raum

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