

Sermon: Year C, 3 Epiphany

Texts: Nehemiah 8:2-10

I Corinthians 12:12-27

Luke 4:14-21

In April of 1943, when the German Gestapo arrested Dietrich Bonhoeffer, what was left on his desk as he was hurried away was a series of manuscripts that, in the time since, have been published under the single-word title Ethics. It was wartime. Bonhoeffer had become an active participant in the German resistance. Of all the things for a theologian to write about, it would be of no surprise to anyone that ethics was his primary concern. He continued this work while in prison, scratching out several more essays using blunt pencils on stolen scraps of paper. The last essay was left unfinished, when, in the final, desperate days of the war, Hitler ordered Bonhoeffer's execution. These last words, however, may be Bonhoeffer's most poignant.

He had no illusions about his fate. He understood the rampant evil of the Third Reich as deeply as anyone. And the title he gave to his own thoughts offers no false promises. The heading reads simply: "On the *Possibility* of the Word of the Church to the World." Possibility: in this context it is such a faint term. War has a way of sobering every enthusiast. And as Allied troops marched ever closer, Bonhoeffer began to ponder what, really, in the traumatic mix of defeat and victory, Christian ethics meant.

He noted, in beginning, that almost everyone was clamoring for some kind of solution, a moral standard, perhaps, that could set things right. In the face of the problems of the world, people want answers, answers that can effectively prevent a society's collapse into tyranny and violence. And some expect that the Church, led by the very arm of God, should be able to provide the perfect map and pattern. If religion is good for anything, they say, it should be this. Bonhoeffer's reply to that desire, however, was direct. Sitting in his prison cell, he wrote this stinging response: "Jesus concerns himself hardly at all with the solution of worldly problems. When he is asked to do so His answer is remarkably evasive... His word is not an answer to human questions and problems... It is not a solution, but a redemption."

The last sentence here should ring in our ears. It is as great a distinction as any that could be made. God offers no solutions to our problems. The purpose of Christianity isn't to make the world a better place, neither by imposition, as some insist, nor even by invitation. Answers, even religious ones, have a bad tendency to fail. History is a stern tutor in this regard.

The true purpose of Christian faith, Bonhoeffer countered, is redemption, not correction. What Jesus shows us is not a way, however honorable, to resolve *our* social ills. He shows us, Bonhoeffer wrote, "the answer of God to the question of God." In Jesus we see God's soul. God shows us who *he* is, which, of itself, solves none of our dilemmas. Redemption is not solution. It is, rather, the unfaltering declaration, on a "quite different plane", that none of our problems, however evil, however brazen, will be able to stand as an obstacle between God and us. Redemption is God's determination, in spite of all our failures, whether petty or miserable or mean, never to abandon us to ourselves – a promise in light of which answers begin to seem paltry and false. Sitting for two years in Tegel prison, awaiting the inevitable judgment that would mean his own death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer could see that there would be no solution to his

problem. But this did not result in his turning to anger or despair. What he began to see with greater clarity was a more surpassing grace, one so comprehensive that, as he was physically led to the gallows, he was able to comfort his fellow prison mates by confidently asserting that his own end would be, by God's word, his true beginning.

Bonhoeffer knew the Bible. He read it closely. He read it, we might say, as if his life depended on it. He wouldn't have missed, then, the startling nature of Jesus' own statement in the Gospel lesson we have heard this morning. Reading in the synagogue from the book of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus found a passage in which the character of the Messiah's arrival is declared. It is a stupendous vision: the poor will cease to be forgotten; they will receive good news. The blind will recover their sight. The oppressed will obtain liberty. And captives, wasting away in prison, will be set free. Who could argue with this? Who could complain? This is the substance of hope, the reason for struggle, the very passion of all mercy. But we can't afford to miss the way in which Jesus said these things apply to him, for he said that this prophecy had reached its complete fulfillment in him, in the very moment of his reading these words. "Today," he said. "In me," he declared. "This has come to be."

His directness is crucial. For the world did not, then, immediately change. Poverty did not cease. The brutal Romans didn't retreat. They didn't give up torture to offer benevolence instead. Everything in the world continued exactly as it had been. No remedies for the people's suffering materialized. No solutions for all the world's problems suddenly became apparent. This was neither the point nor the promise of the Messiah. Jesus didn't provide the gathered congregation instructions by which everything could be made better. What he noted was that in him God himself was present. In him the people could see the fullness of God's compassion and the relentless nature of God's love. In God's descent in incarnation, they could see God's unflinching determination in covenant. They could see the boundless desire of God for our redemption, no matter the degree of our ugliness or the degradation inflicted upon us by others.

In comparison with this divine commitment, solutions pale. As Paul would remind us, in Christ we have been made free to rejoice always, in every state of life, whether we are being abused or whether we are abounding. Christianity has no limits in joy; it isn't dependent on attaining the right circumstances. And in so far as this seems implausible or objectionable, to that degree we have not yet understood what Jesus said.

Redemption isn't discussed much these days – unless we're talking about coupons. It has an abstract, overly-pious connotation, especially when the world seems to have such an immediate need for answers. But Bonhoeffer realized something else in contemplating God's promise. He realized that in Christ both good and evil are transcended. This vast divide, which constantly sets us off, one against another, is made irrelevant. For redemption is the healing of the primal breach that began in the instant when good and evil became distinguishable, when, with moral judgment, we could oppose others and condemn them. In Jesus' name, however, these terms are no longer available to us in strict distinction; for they have been overcome by a more decisive and fundamental means of engagement. Reconciliation is the only word that ultimately endures. It alone names what is true, well beyond every form of fracture and every experience of ridicule, hatred, and disgust. These occur, but, in Christ, they are all rendered meaningless.

This is why Paul refers to the church, not as a society of the right-minded, but, in profoundly organic terms, as the body of Christ. The effect of this shift can't be overestimated. In the human community we do things differently. We have varied purposes. One doesn't always understand or properly appreciate the function of the other. We may be at odds. As a matter of course, we may even be indifferent, one to another. But what we cannot do without severe peril is cut others off or throw them away with disdain. For then the body itself begins to fail. Redemption doesn't require that we all come together under the force of agreement. It is rather the trust that, in spite of all divisions, love is able to bind up every wound. By its humble strength, these words are taken from us: we can no longer say to anyone, "I have no need of you."

Imprisoned, spending most of each day in isolation, bearing the weight of constant threat from guards who were blindly following someone else's urgent hatred, Bonhoeffer began to see that in Jesus we are even given the freedom to step away from matching hatred with hatred and calling that good. Precisely at the epicenter of the very event that in the last century most clearly defined right and wrong, Bonhoeffer, under the crush of storm trooper boots, was able to contend that God's redemption trumps every claim to righteousness. This, he wrote, is what Jesus said, and lived, and died, and established in resurrection.

Imagine, then, who we as the church could be, if, released from the role of being the world's overbearing schoolmarm, waving a harsh ruler in God's name, we chose to embody just this one thing, redemption, not solution. How would people see differently, if, in us, what they saw was not their wrongness in contrast to our supposed rightness, but rather our embrace and the face of Jesus Christ. More than answers, the world needs our joy – more than solutions, such a vision of redemption that for every captivity of every kind a greater freedom can be realized, lived, and shared.

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