

Meditation: Year A, Proper 25

Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18

I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

In July 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in his fifteenth month of his imprisonment, held by the Gestapo for his part in a failed plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. Allied bombings were increasingly. France was being liberated. Young boys were being recruited for frontline duty. And Bonhoeffer was acutely aware that his own fate might soon be gravely decided. His papers, recovered after the war, after his execution, included a poem written at this time, his own reflection about his situation.

It opened with three short words, which comprised one unfathomable question. "Who am I?" he asked. Within the vast cataclysm of war, who am I? To which he made this response, notably beginning in the third person voice. "They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country house. Who am I? They often tell me I would talk to my warders freely and friendly and clearly, as though it were mine to command. Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win." This is the picture of Bonhoeffer that has endured: the polished hero, the stalwart witness, unflappable in faith, a saint in the midst of the darkness of the Third Reich.

But with striking abruptness, Bonhoeffer turns from what others say, looking at him from a distance, to the thinness of what he perceives of himself. "Am I then really all that which other men tell of?" he wonders. "Or am I only what I know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation, tossing in expectation of great events, powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, faint, and ready to say farewell to it all." With this turn, all his previously neat verses are compressed into a tumbling series of anguished cries, expressing the panic of slow strangulation. To himself he seems to be no one. Neither a hero nor a saint. Just one more human being being crushed by evil.

He finished by holding these two divergent visions up for examination, side by side, and the question is placed once more. "Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another? Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army, fleeing in disorder from the victory already achieved? Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine."

But this is not his final line. One more statement follows. After all the struggle, one sentence seems, at the end, to announce the only truth that holds and does not waver. "Whoever I am," Bonhoeffer concludes, "thou knowest, O God." And then, with beautiful symmetry, three short words provide the only real answer to the question he has raised. "I am thine."

To love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind is not a command that can be parsed into a thousand different actions or defined by a long list of things we're all supposed to do. If it were, we'd never come close to fulfilling the law. This was the position of the Pharisees, a legalism that Jesus publicly rejected. To love God as we are asked can be much more simply summarized. It means never to forget or stray from the conviction of Bonhoeffer's last words. Who am I? I am thine. In every moment, I am thine.

All our freedom stems from this confession. Bonhoeffer's poem serves as an explication of the two great commandments set in proper relation. For when we live close to this singular trust in God, then, regardless of our circumstances and regardless of our own personal weaknesses, we may be persons who mysteriously and yet continually in the eyes of others offer mercy, hope, and joy – love worthy of a saint. This is the testimony of Jesus, all the way through death. This was his only prayer: I am thine – from which all the rest of his love followed.

So many of the battles of our lives stem from inverting this relationship. We fight because we insist that life consists of possessing. This is mine. You are mine. God is mine. And with grim inevitability, our neighbors become our enemies. To love God means to lose this addiction, and in place of every compulsion to find security in ownership, to find freedom in faith instead – and from faith, the enduring fellowship which is salvation.

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