

Sermon: Year A, Proper 9

Texts: Zechariah 9:9-12

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the great theologians and Christian witnesses of the last century. He is probably most remembered for his martyrdom – killed by direct order of Adolf Hitler in the very last days of World War Two. It was Hitler's last revenge on those who had plotted to assassinate him in order to liberate Germany and Europe from his oppressive evil. Bonhoeffer's deep faithfulness in the face of his own imminent death has been preserved in letters he sent from prison and in the testimony of those who shared his imprisonment with him. His ending is familiar to us.

The beginning of his ministry is less so. Bonhoeffer was a precocious child, and when he was fourteen he decided to compose a cantata. To us that might seem unusual enough, that a young boy would choose to write classical music at the time when our own children are avidly playing soccer and baseball and video games. But even more notable are the lyrics Bonhoeffer chose. He didn't use his own words, youthful musings about teenage angst and desire. He chose, instead, a text from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, just one verse, which read, "Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?"

Who would think that from this kind of beginning and then all the way through the travails of the Third Reich, that Bonhoeffer would prove to be such a relentless prophet – one who spoke words that few others dared to speak themselves, declaring the goodness of God when it was far more fashionable to vilify others; one who maintained a passionate vision of God's love while, all around, all that could be seen was descending darkness? The reading we have heard from Paul this morning seems better fit to Bonhoeffer's time and character. It describes Paul's own personal descent, full of frustration and confusion. And bottom is finally reached with a realization that can be given in a single devastating word: wretchedness. This, said Paul, was his truest condition. This, in spite of everything else about him that may have seemed impressive or, at least, mediating. And this, he inferred, is the condition we all share together. This is our common lot as human beings.

Well, that's a hard sell, especially for us, now, in our own time. Wretchedness exists, but it really belongs to others. It may have been the unkind fate of millions during the war. It may be the condition currently suffered by orphans in Darfur or innocent villagers in Iraq or even migrant workers in California and coal miners in Appalachia. But we... we are far from wretched. We are, in fact, more than fine. We are outstanding, incredible, superb, gifted. We don't share Paul's morbid inwardness, that backward introspection that narrows us down finally to one conclusive confession. For we have learned to define ourselves very differently and in the opposite direction. We posit from the first that we are wonderful and talented and unique, and then, from there, everything is upward and forward, a long progressive movement of accumulation, collecting accolades and trophies and awards, acclaim and status, possessions, property, style, and, most importantly, a stellar reputation. We esteem ourselves first, and then we hope that others, looking at us, will esteem us too.

Paul's inclination toward inwardness has been replaced by our emphasis on outwardness – the seduction of appearances. And his skill in discernment is continually overwhelmed by our deft abilities of projection. Which, we trust, makes life good. As if our words will make it so.

There is, however, a subtle, and sometimes heavy, burden that comes with this kind of well-intentioned boosting. We can lose our center of identity because of all the masks we've donned. We become less and less ourselves, and more and more merely the product of other's expectations, repeatedly investing ourselves in whatever happens to be lauded as the latest, the hottest, the most profitable, or the most advancing. Treat yourself. Watch a half hour of reality TV. It's all jargon, people spinning fantasies as if television made them true. What's interesting, though, isn't the collection of individuals who are involved. It's the way this programming mirrors, in exaggeration, our own habits and perspectives. We, too, busy ourselves keeping up appearances, talking up fancies that may have no basis at all.

The goal of schooling is no longer education; it's primarily *looking smart*, achieving high marks by whatever means are necessary to impress the next set of reviewers. Increasingly, the goal in business is *looking successful*, even if success is only a finely honed mirage. For many, being religious isn't the grimy work of wrestling with God; it's become the slick deceit of *looking holy and appearing pious*. Who we are has really become secondary to who we are *taken to be*. And our own inflation of ourselves can be enormous – until we realize that, in actuality, we lost ourselves a long time ago, for a cascade of impressions that aren't our own, that can fall away in a moment, that may be dazzling but don't require us at all. We, ourselves, are completely incidental. In comparison, wretchedness, which is so firmly rooted, has much more integrity than such emptiness.

Paul's short treatise ends with a cry, a question, and, then, a response of deep thanksgiving. According to Paul, these all fit together. Inwardness forces us to admit our inevitable hypocrisy and failure. We live as walking contradictions. No matter how fervently we work to be consistent, it simply isn't within our power. Only deception makes us look whole. In our condition, it is precisely saving that we need – but from where and by whom?

It is precisely here that God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Our hypocrisy is answered by God's consistency: Jesus is truly human even through to his own death. Our failure is met by God's resurrection. God raised from the dead the one man who was despised, ridiculed, and executed as the greatest fraud imaginable. He said he himself was God. Our contradictions were met by God's unwavering dedication. We regularly abandon ourselves; yet, in spite of all our betrayals and our rebellions, God chose never to abandon us. In Jesus Christ we are shown the beauty, the goodness, and the truth of God, which is our deliverance and our redemption. Thus, we cannot stop with wretchedness. This is not our end. It is, rather, the most poignant and integral indicator we have of what God's love is and what God, by love, accomplishes for us.

This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived and died. Wretchedness was not something that dismayed him. It led him all the more toward the brightness of the salvation of God, when all our brokenness will be healed. Sequestered away in a Gestapo prison, he was still able to be a beacon of such liberty that, at that time, and, still now, well beyond the limit of his own life, his witness is transforming. Wretchedness may name our condition; but, in Christ, it names our freedom,

too. We may be exactly ourselves, however wretched, because God will be God, and, in Jesus, our wretchedness is only the first measure of God's persistence in reconciliation – which is God's glory and our promise.

Twenty-three years ago, I decided to become an Episcopalian while I was walking down 81<sup>st</sup> street in New York City. I was with a friend. We were exploring the upper West Side. The city was a great escape. It represented endless possibilities and a sense of anonymity that led us to believe – or fantasize – that we could be anybody we wanted to be. No one would know us. No one could tell us otherwise. It was a bright, sunny Fall day. Perfect. As we walked down the block, we started to talk about our experiences in the choir at the Episcopal Church where we had recently been hired. Suddenly, both of us realized, a Methodist and a Congregationalist, that we could recite certain collects from the Book of Common Prayer, without our ever having tried to commit them to memory. They were just there, on our tongues and in our bones. One we both remembered was the Prayer of Humble Access: “We do not presume to come to this Thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness” we said, walking past brownstones, “we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table” – gestures at admitting wretchedness. “But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy...” And there it was: God's salvation.

What we both discovered in that moment was that the liturgy was even better than the city. We didn't need to escape. We didn't need the anonymity. We didn't need, in essence, to hide from others or disguise ourselves, because no matter who we are, we are known by God, and no matter who we are, we are loved by God. And in this divine intimacy, we are at liberty to claim our lives as our own, because God has claimed us... regardless of the nature or the depth of our own failings. Wretchedness marks only the resilience of the grace of God. In that moment, the city couldn't match the beauty of the church.

Paul's words open for us a magnificent freedom. We can stand openly before God and hear in return only God's favor. And if this is the case, then all the rest – all the masquerading and maneuvering, all our brilliant costumery becomes blessedly irrelevant. I'll gladly touch bottom with Paul and say, this is great good news.

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