

Sermon – 9/4/16

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St. John the Evangelist

Pentecost 16: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Luke 14:25-53

If you were one of the thousands of people who were paying attention to the madness this past Lent you would know that the winner of the Golden Halo, in Fr. Tim's tournament of holiness, Lent Madness, was The Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20<sup>th</sup> century German pastor and theologian. He garnered almost 5,000 votes in the final match up alone, where he triumphed easily over Julian of Norwich.

Bonhoeffer was hardly the dark horse of the field. As I hope many of you know, he is most famous for—despite being an ardent pacifist—participating in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler during WWII. This plot failed and Bonhoeffer was arrested and put into a camp where his indefatigable spirit won over even some of his guards. But alas he was executed just two weeks before the allied troops liberated the camps.

This heroic bio has made him one of the most famous Christians of the past century, a man whose faithful witness and courage are an example for us to aspire to. And with nationalistic fascism being flirted with across the globe these days, it was unsurprising that he would go far in the tournament.

But I for one, was surprised that he won the whole thing. Bonhoeffer was a prodigious theologian who wrote copiously and taught extensively and in his work, put forth a powerful, but highly demanding interpretation of the Christian Gospel that has served as inspiration to many, but also a challenge and stern rebuke to any who might want to wade into this Christianity thing half-way. He wrote often, especially in his work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, about the need for Christians to be all in, committed completely to Jesus Christ. And most Christians I know, myself included, would fail his test of loyalty to the Gospel, even if they thought it a very commendable ideal.

One of Bonhoeffer's most famous quotes from *The Cost of Discipleship* epitomizes his forceful style: "When Christ calls a [person]," he writes, "he bids him come and die." Whoa. That's a little intense, right? But he is hitting on the point that if we are to give ourselves to Christ, we must die to our old selves to be made new in his likeness. We must let the old pass away in order for the new to come. We must die to sin in order to be righteous. We must die to self to live for others. This is the central message of the Cross and Resurrection in which we glory. We must die in order to live. Now Bonhoeffer goes on to explain that he doesn't mean a literal death, he's not encouraging all Christians to go out and court martyrdom. But he is talking about the many and repeated deaths—to pride, to sin, to selfishness, to greed, etc.—one must undergo in order to be a disciple. The "cost of discipleship," it turns out, is all that you are; nothing but your everything.

One of the scriptural passages Bonhoeffer focuses in on in this book is our Gospel passage today, where Jesus himself outlines the cost of discipleship, and the need to weigh those costs up front in order to be prepared for what will be asked of you. "If you were going to build a tower, you'd do some budget forecasting, wouldn't you?" He says. "And if you were planning on going to war, you would scout out the enemy, right?" If not you'd find yourself unable to complete the task you had set out on. Jesus is giving his followers fair warning: following me will mean giving your life to, and maybe even for me.

Now I want to say a word about the most alarming aspect of this passage which comes at the beginning. It's one of those cringe-worthy, "Oh Jesus, I really wish you hadn't said that," kind of lines. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple." This is tough stuff. So let's pause here. First of all, the term "hate" is a Semitic term often used in the Bible to denote to "love less," which is how Matthew transcribes this passage, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy to be my disciple." Still challenging, but at least we don't have to "hate" our loved ones in the way we might think.

What we do have to do though is understand how and why we even have loved ones to begin with. For like life itself, having a father and mother, sister, brother, daughter, son, wife, husband who we love, and who love us, is the highest gift God gives us. Think of the love of God being like the love we share with parents, sibling, spouses and children all rolled up into one, and then some. All of these relationships which give our lives meaning and joy are a manifestation of God's love for us. Therefore to love them more than Jesus, is to misunderstand where that love comes from.

But there is still a challenge latent in those words that speaks to Jesus' larger point in this passage which is, that the cost of following me is total. He is asking for nothing less than uncompromising loyalty—which is not the same as unquestioning or inflexible loyalty. Being a Christian will require your whole person, mind, body and soul. And it will require a lifetime of work and devotion. A lifetime of deaths and, God-willing, an eternity of Resurrections.

It seems fitting that we have this passage on a Sunday we are celebrating a few Baptisms, and in this special case an adult baptism. It's a fair warning. Jesus is putting it all out front. This is what you are signing up for: death and new life. And that is what all of you who have been baptized already, also signed up for. When we stand to affirm our baptismal covenant we are taking that same mantle upon our own shoulders. This dying to the old self and being reborn into union with Christ does not get as much emphasis when we are baptizing babies. But it's central to our Baptismal theology: "we are baptized into the death of Jesus," we say, so that we might "live in the power of his resurrection." We say over the water: "in it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." And then a third time: "those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior." Baptism is no cute initiation rite. It is a monumental moment; a full-scale revolution of self. For from now on you are a Christian, it becomes your identity, an identity we need to live up to everyday. There's no, "well I will seek to follow Christ at home but at work I've gotta check my discipleship at the door." There's no, "well tomorrow I will be a Christian, but today I don't feel like it." You must be a Christian 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year for as many years as you've got. Nothing less than everything we have must be offered up to him. Our lives must be remade and reshaped by him. This is our pledge. This is the price. This is our life's work. And it is the path to glory everlasting.

{And don't worry, if you're not sure exactly what that means or what it should look like? Don't worry, that's what we—the Church—are here for: to help you sort it out as you go along the way.}

This all may sound a bit daunting, but I assure, it is not some onerous task—though there will be plenty of times when following Jesus means not getting your own way. It is rather, a way of experiencing the great mystery that in finding something to give our entire life to, our entire self, of loving something so deeply that we may be willing to die for it, our life takes on new and greater meaning, purpose and power. And if you think about it, based on all that we have been given, an offering of all our hearts, minds, bodies and souls to Jesus is not even close to enough. But it's all we've got. And it's what he gave to us. So in a strange, wonderful way, we come to feel that all we have, is the least we can pay. Our lives become a gift returned, with interest, to the one from whom all our blessings flow.

In a couple minutes, at the Offertory we are going to sing my favorite hymn. The one I knew I wanted played at my ordination and the one I have penciled in for my funeral. It wasn't written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but I think it could have been. And it is the last stanza I find that always catches me up short and calls me on to fuller and more complete discipleship, so I share that with you, in closing:

*"Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all."*