

Altered Through Unlikely Voices

Mark 8:31-38

February 25, 2024

Rev. Scott Anderson

Early in my ministry serving the Wisconsin Council of Churches, I was invited to a gathering at Congregation Sinai, a Reform Jewish synagogue in Milwaukee to watch a new PBS documentary on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, followed by a discussion with local religious leaders.

I remember it to be a powerful and disturbing experience to sit in the sanctuary of a Jewish synagogue and watch images of Kristallnacht, the night in November 1938 when coordinated gangs of Nazis desecrated synagogues and attacked Jewish-owned businesses all over Germany. It was a powerful experience to sit in a synagogue and see images of Auschwitz. It was a painful experience as a Protestant to see leaders and bishops of the German Protestant Church smiling, eagerly shaking hands with Adolf Hitler, arms raised in the Nazi salute.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as many of you know, was a German pastor and promising theologian from a distinguished, traditional German family. Days before the end of the war, he was executed by the Nazis for his participation in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

In the introduction to his definitive biography of Bonhoeffer, Union Seminary scholar Larry Rasmussen asks, “What explains the continuing interest in Bonhoeffer: documentaries, made-for-TV movies, musical compositions (including an opera), conferences, commemorative worship services,” not to mention countless references to Bonhoeffer in countless sermons?

Rasmussen thinks it’s because in Bonhoeffer we see an example of authentic Christian faith, an unlikely voice whose life became an authentic combination of words and acts. I think it’s because to know his story is to understand that he actually did something that is at the very heart of what we mean by Christian faith, something none of us wants to do, perhaps would not do—namely take up a cross and follow Jesus and in the process lose our lives.

Just before the war, Bonhoeffer was in New York, at Union Seminary. Friends in the scholarly community had encouraged him to get out of Germany and to pursue his scholarly vocation in the safety of an American seminary. In June of 1939, he wrote a letter to his mentor, another towering theologian of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr:

“I have had time to think and pray about my situation and that of my nation,” writes Bonhoeffer. “I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through the difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany...Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make the choice in security.”

And so, he boarded one of the last ships to sail from the United States to Germany. He became part of the Confessing Church, a new denomination that spoke out against Nazism, organized an underground seminary to train pastors for a new and risky prophetic ministry, and he joined the resistance and a plot to assassinate Hitler. When the conspiracy was discovered, he was arrested, spent two years in prison, and was executed on April 9, 1945.

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

That may be the most radical, most important, most provocative thing Jesus ever said.

It happens in the middle of the story according to the gospel writer Mark, Jesus and his disciples had been in Galilee, visiting and teaching in the synagogues. He healed the sick, received and welcomed those who were on the margins of society, touched the untouchable, broke bread with the unclean, and welcomed the children. His reputation preceded him. Crowds were now waiting for him, following him.

And then one day, after three years, his attitude changes. He turns his attention away from Galilee, south to Jerusalem, from the pleasant serenity of fishing villages and fields of wild lilies to the noise and confusion of the capital city. It's the day his unlikely voice startles the disciples by asking, "Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?" And when Peter says it for them—a staggering claim—"You are the Christ, the Messiah," Jesus chooses the occasion to introduce a totally new idea, chooses the occasion to teach them that this adventure is about to take a dangerous turn, chooses the moment to tell them that in all probability this is going to end with his suffering and death.

Peter speaks again: "God forbid, Jesus. You're not going to get arrested. You're not going to suffer. If you're half of what I just called you—the Messiah, God's anointed, God's man—you're not going to suffer and die. That's nonsense."

"Get behind me, Peter," Jesus says. "You missed the whole point."

And that's the moment he says, "If you would follow me, take up your cross. If you save your life, you lose it. If you lose it for my sake, you save it."

Jesus had never mentioned a cross before. They knew what a cross was—the Romans had introduced it—the appallingly cruel and brutal and public means of executing traitors and troublemakers, a highly effective means of keeping order and peace. "Take up a cross?" Surely, he was kidding. Some church growth expert once said that you couldn't find a more difficult marketing strategy than that. "Take up a cross and lose your life" is hardly a way to grow your church.

Remember that this gospel was written a generation after Jesus had departed. Mark writes this story with full awareness of what happens to Jesus at the end of his life. By taking up our cross and following Jesus, he is preparing disciples then and now for whatever life is going to throw at us.

In times of prosperity either we make prosperity our religion, which is pretty popular these days, or we imagine that we can do without religion altogether. When times are good, who needs something that provides a costlier form of meaning, like a cross? When turmoil happens to others, we can be mildly empathetic, perhaps even sympathetic, and maybe we can even utter that famous aphorism, "There but for the grace of God go I."

But when turmoil hits *us*, however, when we are knocked flat, when all of our securities and our cherished illusions are challenged to the breaking point, then comes the great question we must both ask and answer: "What is left when everything we have has been taken from us?" It's the great question that thousands of Ukrainian families who have lost loved ones in war are asking right now, along with the millions who are refugees in neighboring counties. Or anyone who sits at the bedside of a dying spouse. What is left when everything has been taken from us? How will you manage when trouble comes? How will you cope when you are tested to the breaking point? How will you live with fear, failure, and anxiety?

And so, none of us should be embarrassed, no matter how much education we have, no matter how many professional titles follow our name, no matter how much money we've made or how successful we've been, that when adversity strikes, we seek the God whom we have forgotten in prosperity, for what is God for if God is not there when we seek him? We should not

be embarrassed that in trouble we remember one profound theological truth: that God is to be found where God is most needed—in trouble, sorrow, sickness, adversity and even in death itself. To take up your cross and follow Jesus is the way we live that truth.

Inner strength in the midst of adversity comes, I believe, from the sure conviction that God has placed us in the world to do the work of life, and not of death. Should we be surprised that amidst all the turmoil and chaos of that violent crowd on Good Friday, when the world had done its worst to him, Jesus forgave his enemies, reunited his friends, and redeemed a criminal?

You see, faith is not the opposite of doubt or death, but the means whereby we face and endure doubt and death and overcome our fear of them. We believe that death, not doubt nor fear *ever* have the last word. That bedrock conviction is testified to by the voices and experience of our ancestors in the faith, and by our fellow Christians who labor beside us and for God in the lifegiving work of Jesus whenever adversity befalls us.

Peter Gomes, the former chaplain at Harvard University, reported once about a friend of his, Ernest Gordon, who was dean of the chapel at Princeton for many years, and who was captured on the River Kwai during World War II. While in a Japanese prison camp, Gordon and his fellow British captives were initially deeply religious, reading their Bibles, praying, singing hymns, and holding worship services, witnessing, and testifying to their faith. They were hoping and expecting God would reward them by freeing them or at least mitigating their captivity.

God didn't deliver, however, and the men became both disillusioned and angry. They gave up their outward display of the faith; but after a while, as they began tending to the needs of their fellow prisoners, caring for them, protecting the weaker ones and in some cases dying for one another, they began to discern something of the spirit of God in their midst. They discovered that Christian faith is not something you believe but what you do for others when it seems that you can do nothing at all. Their compassion gave them an inner strength, and their inner strength gave them compassion.

This is the costlier form of meaning that Jesus is inviting his disciples—including us—to embrace. Not only to *endure* adversity, but to *overcome* it, not to look for what we can get, but for what we have been given, and for what we can give.

Amen.