

FAITH AS SURRENDER

Psalm 139: 1-18

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a famous German theologian and minister who was executed by the Nazis in 1945. Bonhoeffer's story is a fascinating one. He grew up in a happy home, in a large family. His father was a respected psychiatrist and neurologist and his mother was an accomplished musician and teacher. The Bonhoeffers were part of the upper class of educated elite, and even though they considered themselves nominally religious like most Germans, Europe was beginning to experience secularization. Church was becoming more and more something you were associated with in a nominal way, but it wasn't an essential part of your weekly practice. Most everyone believed in God, but being connected with a spiritual community and engaging in regular communal worship, prayer and fellowship was becoming less and less a mainstream thing. Today in Europe and in places like Canada, this has become the trend. 100 years ago, it was just beginning.

But Dietrich was unique in his family in that he became very interested in cultivating his personal faith as a Christian. He was hungry to learn more, and in time, he felt an inner stirring to study theology toward becoming a minister. What I want to focus on in this sermon, though, is not so much Bonhoeffer's theology. More important is his inner journey, especially as trouble comes in the form of Adolf Hitler.

First of all, Bonhoeffer, like his family and like many of the German elite, are dumbfounded when Hitler is elected to power. How could the German people elect someone so narcissistic, small-minded, self-serving and lacking in honour and principle? They hadn't realized how desperate and resentful the average German had become after the first world war, and therefore, how vulnerable to be manipulated by someone who would fuel such resentment into racist hate and a spirit of revenge. Sound familiar? Fearful, actually, when we ponder at what's happening down south and what affect that has throughout the world in fuelling the worst elements of hate and racism – most recently in New Zealand for example.

At one point, while studying in the U.S. Bonhoeffer hears how bad things are becoming back home. Jews and others are being rounded up, abused and imprisoned. Things are going from bad to worse. People are being arrested and jailed, even members of the elite class. Any opposition to Hitler is being met with brute force and the loss of all privilege and rights. So what's Bonhoeffer to do? Those close to him urge him to stay in the U.S until this whole nightmare is over.

But Bonhoeffer makes an important and fateful decision. He chooses to go back to Germany. He must get his hands dirty. If he is to have any credible role in the rebuilding of Germany after all that is happening is over, he will have to get involved now. And so he goes back. But things keep getting worse. People are being routinely attacked, arrested and imprisoned. Whole groups, especially Jews, but also homosexuals and those with physical disabilities among others are targeted. Bonhoeffer is horrified. He and others, including many within Hitler's own government, develop plan after plan to remove Hitler from power. At one point, it seems, the only option left is a plot to assassinate him. Bonhoeffer struggles to justify this as a follower of Jesus. Murder is murder. Where is forgiveness? Where is the sacredness of life, any and all life? And yet, Bonhoeffer comes to the conviction that one man must die to save the many. It's an act of loving justice, to risk all, to commit sin to prevent even greater sin.

But sadly, tragically, all attempts end up failing. And not only that. Bonhoeffer and most of the conspirators are found out. Those who survive their arrest are imprisoned and eventually taken to concentration camps. Bonhoeffer is one of these prisoners. Bonhoeffer wrote some important theological books while he was a minister and theologian. But he really became famous after his personal journals were found, those he kept while in prison. These became especially precious after Bonhoeffer was executed. It was the saddest thing. Germany had lost the war. They were surrendering. But before many were liberated from concentration camps and prisons, and before the remaining Nazis were captured, Hitler ordered speedy executions, especially of political prisoners. Bonhoeffer was one of those executed.

What I find most fascinating is how in his personal journals, reflections and poetry while in prison, you witness a man who is struggling, struggling to figure out who he is. Extreme situations, traumas, losses in relationships, losses in people we love, big life changes... all such life events can shake us up and challenge us to reflect on who it is we are. Are we who we think we are? Are we who we want to be? Are we who we're supposed to be? What do others say about us compared to what we want to think about ourselves? When we are shaken we struggle to make sense of ourselves as self-questioning and all kinds of conflicting voices torment us, not letting us rest.

How do we find ourselves? How do we grow and mature through the difficult experiences of life that shake up our sense of self? I would like to explore such questions using our scripture reading and one of Bonhoeffer's most famous poems composed while in prison. The poem is entitled: "Who am I." I've numbered the paragraphs into 4 sections, so you can follow along while I'm making reference to the poem. Throughout, Bonhoeffer is asking the same question over and over again: Who am I?

Throughout the poem there is dissonance between what other people claim about him and what he's feeling deep inside. In part 1), Bonhoeffer lists some of the things fellow prisoners claim about him:

1) Who am I? They often tell me,
I come out of my cell
Calmly, cheerfully, resolutely,
Like a lord from his palace.
Who am I? They often tell me,
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.
Who am I? They also tell me,
I carried the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one who is used to winning.

Others claim that Bonhoeffer is handling his fate calmly, courageously, confidently, in full control of his emotions and actions. This is empowering for others because they're terrified, angry, frustrated, hopeless and sad. Bonhoeffer's courageous confidence no matter what, is a great inspiration and help.

And yet... we then get to part 2):

2) Am I really then what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, melancholic, and ill, like a caged bird,
Struggling for breath, as if hands clasped my throat,
Hungry for colors, for flowers, for the songs of birds,
Thirsty for friendly words and human kindness,
Shaking with anger at fate and at the smallest sickness,
Trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Tired and empty at praying, at thinking, at doing,
Drained and ready to say goodbye to it all.

Wow! Inside Bonhoeffer is in pieces just like everyone else. He is human just like everyone else. He is broken, questioning, full of doubt, internally volatile, feeling extremes of anger, hopelessness, fear, and a terrible loneliness.

So who is the real Bonhoeffer? This question torments him as we move into part 3) of the poem:

3) Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and another tomorrow?
Am I both at once? In front of others, a hypocrite,
And to myself a contemptible, fretting weakling?
Or is something still in me like a battered army,
running in disorder from a victory already achieved?
Who am I? These lonely questions mock me.

Bonhoeffer is tormented because he can't figure himself out. Is his real self all those inner feelings he can express to no one but himself through his poetry and journals? Or is his real self also that courageous part of him, not just a façade, rising up in him because he cares about others, to strengthen them and be there for them? Who is the real Bonhoeffer?

I'm sure we can all relate to Bonhoeffer in some way can we not? There are times in life where we are not just free to express all the rage or sadness or fear in us openly. We are with others, we're self-conscious of what they'll think, or we feel responsibility for them, be they children, family, friends or colleagues. We need to be strong for them because they're going through trouble themselves coping with whatever has happened or is happening. We need to project confidence, calm and control even though inside we may be shaking in fear or anguish.

So who's the real me? Who's the real Bonhoeffer? The problem is, if the only person who can know and embrace the real me is me, if the only person in the whole universe to understand the mystery that is me is me, that leaves me in a highly precarious situation. What happens if we can't figure ourselves out? I don't know about you but I know that I have only scratched the surface of who I am, because I can't possibly know what may come out of me or what I'm made of until I experience certain things. So how do I find some peace in that? How do I find some acceptance in that? How do I find some groundedness in the truth of that?

Bonhoeffer's poem doesn't end with part 3). There is part 4):

4) Whoever I am, You know me, I am yours, O God.

There is so much in this one line that needs to be fleshed out. And perhaps our scripture reading can open it up for us. Who knows whether Bonhoeffer had Psalm 139 in mind when he composed this line.

There are three parts to this line: Whoever I am – Bonhoeffer's first step is to accept this dissonance in himself. He doesn't have to figure it all out, and that's ok. He is fragmented right now, he is a mystery to himself. Whoever I am... And yet, the second part is the critical part:

Whoever I am, **you know me...** Now, another presence is introduced into the poem. It's no longer just Bonhoeffer talking within himself. He is talking it out with another... with God.

Psalm 139 is all about the experience of feeling that I am known in ways I can never fully know myself: "O Lord you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely." Imagine having the kind of faith that you are known this way. There is nothing about you, even what you don't know about yourself, nothing about you that is not known. Wouldn't that be a threat, a threat to your privacy? Aren't there things about you you'd rather no one knew? Aren't there things about you you'd rather forget or pretend never occurred?

And yet, somehow, for Bonhoeffer and the Psalmist, it is sheer relief, it is balm to the soul, it is healing and peace that they are known in this kind of way. Why? It can only be that they feel totally accepted and loved for all of who they are, mistakes and struggles and all – totally known and totally embraced in all their fragmentary dissonance and brokenness. That's powerful!

But it's not just the brokenness that's known and loved. It's the beauty too. It's not just the dark things in us we're afraid of exposing. Many of us can't fully recognize the spectacular beauty in us either. Unless we're known and loved in all our brokenness and all our beauty we will not fully embrace ourselves in all of who we are either.

And so, Bonhoeffer and the Psalmist end their poetry with the highest spiritual act: Surrender. "Whoever I am, you know me, **I am yours, O God,**" writes Bonhoeffer. "I come to the end – I am still with you," writes the Psalmist. The kind of faith that doesn't have to have me all figured out, the kind of faith that can simply trust and entrust myself to another, the kind of faith that comes to that place in and through difficult times that I don't have to have it all figured out for I am known by another, loved completely in all of who I am, and held not only today and tomorrow, but eternally... isn't this kind of faith a powerful thing? And isn't this kind of spiritual act of surrendering in faith a liberating thing? To be free to be without having to have it figured out... God has it figured out and so I don't have to. I can accept myself with all the dissonance in me. God will walk with me as I grow into who I am becoming as a child of divine love, wherever that will take me.

May we all, each and every one of us here, discover for ourselves ever more deeply, this kind of faith. We are known and loved in all our brokenness and all our beauty... We don't have to have it all figured out to find our peace. We are on a journey, and our journey doesn't end here and now or in this life... Amen.