

*After some preliminary words of warning that this is a serious word to the Church for those who are serious. Pr. Carlos*

*“The Final Division”*

Jeremiah 1:4-10  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
Luke 4:21-30

Sermon / Study / Concerning 1st Corinthians Chapter 13 and love.

Perhaps not everyone will know the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Most people in and of the year 2010 wouldn't remember or know him unless they are Christian theologians or modern historians or perhaps studious Lutherans who have sought to fathom theologically something of the great revulsion and revelation of the last century that was called World War II. Some of you may not know that we have a Bonhoeffer stained glass window in one of our Children's Classrooms there in our Christian Education wing at Peace East. That beautiful celebration of Bonhoeffer and his ministry includes two small colored panes that are illustrative of his life and time. One has a small swastika imprinted there and the other a hangman's noose. Perhaps even more poignant is that there are two paper hearts that are pasted over those symbols on the Bonhoeffer window. I think I know why, those paper hearts are there to protect young minds from such symbolism in what seems to me a most appropriate way.

The nation and culture of Bonhoeffer was one of the greatest cultures the world has ever known and it became undone as he and others felt powerless to stop it as it became demonic in its seeking to dominate the rest of the world's national boundaries and will. Germany also challenged the self understanding and thinking of all people, especially those who were Christian and even more especially those who were and are Lutheran by offering an opportunity for violent and ruthless men and women to claim Christ as their Lord in all they did. And we should note that Germany also sought to redefine

freedom as slavery to a human system known then as National Socialism and Fascism and of course known to us today by other names. And Bonhoeffer believed this was wrong.

I learned of Bonhoeffer when I went to seminary and one of my professors who had the rare distinction of a Phd in Homiletics (who was to become a close friend of mine regularly taught and preached in reference to Bonhoeffer's theology.) I became even more fascinated with Bonhoeffer years later when I had the privilege of sitting in the classroom of Klaus Penzal at Perkins School of Theology at SMU who had spent his life in the service of teaching Church History and taught the Lutheran Reformation like no one I'd ever heard before or since. Dr. Penzal's knowledge of Church history was learned from the ground up in Germany when he served as a Hitler Youth during WWII and served as a laundry boy in a German prison.

Let me tell you a little more about Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a German Lutheran preacher and minister) who literally stood and then actually fought against a demonic culture which was the nation and people and the church of his own family and birth. Of course his preaching and teaching were rejected by the power elite of that culture and he was silenced until he escaped to a western world that Germany had yet to conquer and yet he returned to Germany as a soldier and as a spy in order to participate in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler and stop the demonic Germany and save Germany from itself and save others from it.

You might know or want to know that many of the ethicists and theologians of my generation and professors I've known from the generation before me have never forgiven Bonhoeffer for his decision to participate in the violence that was marshaled against Hitler. And of course neither did the Nazi Party of Germany who saw to it that he was executed only a few days before the fall of Germany. And then a man I knew who taught Church History named Klaus

Pensel was the young laundry boy who picked up Bonhoeffer's clothing on the day of his execution. Bonhoeffer was hanged, ostensibly, so that he never would or could spread his version of the Gospel of Jesus Christ even after those whom he opposed were to be judged by the world through Nuremberg and history itself. But, Bonhoeffer's writings remain... even the letters he wrote from prison. And so, I'm quoting from him today from his book entitled "The Cost of Discipleship" and I am saying his message is for us.

Bonhoeffer speaks to us today in and because of the lection readings that are before us. He speaks to us as a young man who was called to a ministry like Jeremiah to a world that was falling apart and to a people who were heartless toward God who did not appreciate or accept God's word speaking through him. Bonhoeffer can also be seen in the Gospel lesson which speaks of Jesus who saw that he couldn't minister to his own people of Nazareth and was rejected by them as a prophet without honor. And Bonhoeffer is, I think, most profoundly experienced through the Epistle of Paul to Corinth where Paul speaks of love in light of the gifts of Christ to those who would be known as the body of Christ but they at Corinth had lost their way and become those who would use the gifts of God to aggrandize themselves and their way of life and their own egos.

I want to alert you that Bonhoeffer's words are not for the intellectually enlightened so much. What he says is not academic really. Yet, even more so, his is not a word for the theologically squeamish. For there is a difficult word here in the life and writing of Bonhoeffer concerning love and life. And so I believe that Bonhoeffer's life is a witness to true disciples of Christ whether his ethic is love for country, love for family, or love for God. But, in the final analysis, Bonhoeffer's message is about the love of God for us and the love of Christ for his disciples which is in Bonhoeffer's theology and

understanding (and mine too) exactly what defines us as disciples, as Christians, and as spiritual beings.

Do you think Jesus loved the people of Nazareth? Do you think Paul loved the people of Corinth? Do you think Paul's words in 1st Corinthians 13 as to the nature of love are the way we use that word normally today, in our culture, in our world, among our people who call themselves Lutheran? Bonhoeffer says that love is the real measure of our discipleship. He says, "The Church is marked off from the world not by a special privilege, but by the gracious election and calling of God." And so I'm saying that we as the Church are now facing a calling prior to the great judgment at the end of time (that theologians call eschaton) and we have this scene of the great judgment as a backdrop of God's calling at any time to those who are separated from each other and God. And so, of course, we want to know and so we ask what is of essence here? For this calling and judgment sounds personal, and sounds like the stuff of our salvation of our soul and spirit. So, even more so, we will need to know where we stand in our relation to Christ and one another.

Here's the question: Is it those who know God's will and do it who are better than others and therefore deserve heaven by way of God's election and grace? We already know that the answer to this is No. We can't help but know that the clear implication of both the Judgment of Jesus upon Nazareth and what his judgment upon each person at the eschaton is. Our Lord teaches that even those who thought they served God didn't know that they'd fail to serve Jesus Christ when they failed to serve others. But, he also says that when people acted as servants to others they also didn't know that they were serving Jesus. So, Bonhoeffer's point about love (our love for one another) and the judgment that we who do not love one another cannot have loved God is simply the same as Jesus' point as it is already made clear by the scripture text we call "The Great White Throne Judgment. But then

Bonhoeffer also brings the 13th Chapter of First Corinthians to bear upon this concern for love so that we might understand both of these texts more fully.

In trying to fathom how it is that people who are sincerely trying to be Christian could still fail to serve the Christ, Bonhoeffer points out that, "Jesus reveals to his disciples the possibility of a demonic faith which produces wonderful works quite indistinguishable from the works of the true disciples... works of charity, miracles, perhaps even of personal sanctification, but which is nevertheless a denial of Jesus and of the life of discipleship." The words "demonic faith" fall upon us like giant stone tablets and crush our misapprehension that we might have church, and belief, and even a sense of heart, and still fall short of the mark of discipleship. Bonhoeffer is even more brutal than when he reminds us of Paul in 1 Cor. 13 and says, "St. Paul must even reckon with the possibility that the very works of Christian charity, giving away one's goods, and even martyrdom, may be done without love, without Christ, without the Holy Spirit."

Our problem as orthodox Christian individuals is that even though we know we will die, we believe we will also experience another last day and that "Christ will come again to Judge the living and the dead." So, because we are spiritual beings, in essence we realize that we are subject to the reality of God's apocalyptic resolution of the war between light and darkness and there is no escape for us from this. Bonhoeffer's words are about what constitutes a disciple, a true disciple, who both counts and comprehends the cost of their discipleship in the cross of Christ. And yet, he and we also know that this is not just a matter of individual consideration but also a matter for and of the history of God's people, the Church.

This is the hard part. (As if what I've said to now isn't hard enough.) But, we count ourselves the Church of Jesus Christ which is Christ's body. But according to Bonhoeffer and Christ we are also infiltrated with those who are

not of the Body. But we are also clearly told that only God knows who "we and they" are. And, we don't get to decide this. We are the Church, but our decisions concerning those who may or may not appear to us to be a part of the Body of Christ are ultimately without foundation. So, the judgment that will make manifest both this horrific and honorific reality is at the last day when God through Christ will decide and reveal the truth of our struggle to be Church as those who are following light or following darkness. Bonhoeffer puts it this way. "Here is the most serious, most incredible satanic possibility in the Church, the final division, which only occurs at the last day. But Christ's followers must ask by what ultimate criterion Jesus will accept or reject them. Who will pass the test, and who will not? The answer lies in the words of Jesus to the last of the rejected: "I have never known you.""

So, by comparison, everything else before us is superficial really. The ultimate question, really, is are we known by Christ? Not, have we given all, have we done all, or even have we known him? But, has he known us? This is a question concerning the Holy Spirit in both the life of the Church and in those who call themselves Christian and it is always the question for those who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ who have been called to such by Jesus Christ. And therefore, it is the concern of all of us here today who would dare to worship God, and claim to be the Church, and want deeply to be disciples.

I think that we, especially as Lutheran Christians, should understand better than anyone that Bonhoeffer knew what the Church that was converted to following darkness in the name of Christ looked like. And we also know that he sent us a warning by letter from the world of World War II... So, I am recommending that in our hearts and in our minds and in the very soul of us, let us consider the words of Detrich Bonhoeffer and...

Let us pray...

God of life and light and love. We want to be your people and so we listen for your call in the voice of Christ our savior. Amen.

*Written by Pr. Carlos Summers to be preached on January 30 and 31, 2010 in the year of our Lord to the people of Peace Lutheran Church, Rogers. The Bonhoeffer quotes are selected from the last few pages of Chapter 19 (The Great Divide) of Bonhoeffer's "The Cost of Discipleship" first published in 1937 with the first english language edition published by The Macmillan Company in 1949.*