

## ***Remembering Dietrich Bonhoeffer***

February 4, 1906 – April 9, 1945

*Text: Philippians 3:20*

I'm sure you've noticed the large sign that I've placed at the front of the sanctuary this morning. It's something, I believe, you've seen before. It's a framed wooden plaque from World War II showing all those from Pilgrim Evangelical and Reformed Church (the larger of this congregation's two predecessor churches) who served their country in the armed forces, with the names of those who made the ultimate sacrifice at the bottom. I was not born until 15 years after the end of that war, and I simply cannot imagine what life must have been like with so many young men – all from the same church, and many from the same families – being called upon to put their lives at risk in faraway places. Some of these names are people I look forward to talking to every week. Others are people I never knew.

The two world wars must've been very strange times for the people of Pilgrim Church, since nearly all of that church's members had German ancestry. In fact, one member who had been called upon to fight in World War II once mentioned to me that he found it perplexing to think that he might unknowingly be in combat against one of his own relatives. During the First World War, people who spoke German were often looked upon suspiciously by English-speaking Americans, but by the Second World War, people of German descent seldom had their patriotism questioned. That didn't stop someone from pulling a prank on the church's Brotherhood at one of their meetings during the war, however. At the Brotherhood's meetings, they always opened by singing a nonsense song called *Schnitzelbank* ("whittling bench"). In fact, Casey Durst recently gave me a poster with the words to this song on it. Well in the 1993 history, Gene Mautz (who was serving overseas at the time of the prank in question) recounted how his father had told him that as the men of the Brotherhood were singing *Schnitzelbank*, some joker arranged to have a uniformed Zanesville city policeman enter the room, probably suddenly and with a stern look on his face. "After all," said Gene, "we were at war with Germany and here they were, singing a German song. I guess some of them were taken aback for a minute!"

The war in Europe ended in May 1945. Easter that year fell on April 1. This means that Palm Sunday fell on March 25. I mention this for two reasons. First, because I think the people of Pilgrim E&R Church in Zanesville were struggling with mixed emotions on Palm Sunday 1945. They must have been dealing with sadness because of the men from this church who had been killed in the war, and anxiety for those who were still in the service. They must also have been quite hopeful, because by this time, it was evident that the Allies would win the war. But also on a congregational level, things were not quite as they should be. It was still the tradition back then that the youth of the church be confirmed on Palm Sunday so that their first communion could be on Maundy Thursday. But not in 1945. For the only time in its history that I could see, Pilgrim Church had had a pastor whose ethics they could not affirm and whose resignation they had to force. With no pastor in place on Palm Sunday, confirmation could not happen on the normal date, but had to be put off until May. The joy of Easter that year must have been mixed with more than a little disappointment that so many things were different.

The second reason that I mention Palm Sunday is because of something that happened in Germany the same day – March 25, 1945. That morning, one of the twentieth century's greatest pastors and theologians celebrated the final worship service of his life on earth. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor in the German partner church of the old Evangelical Synod – the denomination to which Pilgrim Church belonged. Bonhoeffer had been brought up in a well-to-do and very intellectual family. When Dietrich announced to his parents that he intended to study theology in college and become a pastor, they were disappointed, and found their son's ambitions a bit pitiful. But he excelled in his studies and after doing an internship with a German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Barcelona, he came to America for a year in 1931. Here he studied and lectured at Union Seminary in New York where one of the main professors was a pastor of the Evangelical Synod named Reinhold Niebuhr (Niebuhr is also one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest theologians, but is best known today for a prayer attributed to him – a prayer called "The Serenity Prayer" which contains the popular saying 'One day at a time'). While in New York, Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr maintained an ongoing debate about the role of a Christian in secular affairs. Niebuhr believed that a disciple of Jesus Christ had a responsibility to be involved in social action; Bonhoeffer disagreed and believed that the Church should keep to its own sphere of influence.

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany where he was ordained in November 1931. Soon after that he pastored two German-speaking churches in London – one Lutheran and one Reformed. In 1933 Hitler became the leader of Germany, and Bonhoeffer returned in 1935 to become part of what was called the Confessing Church. You see, most German Protestants supported Hitler, and the official church there not only placed itself under Hitler's leadership, but also cooperated with his teachings by refusing to grant equal rights to people of Jewish ancestry – even those who were Christians. They went so far as to deny the fact that Jesus was himself a Jew, and they refused to acknowledge the teachings of the Old Testament. Protestants loyal to Hitler were called German Christians, and the Confessing Church struggled for years to be recognized internationally as the true representative of the German Protestant Church. Once back in Germany, Bonhoeffer took over the training of pastors for the Confessing Church, and created a small seminary in a town in present-day Poland called Finkenwalde (we'd probably translate that as Finchwood). These pastors refused to take the required oath of allegiance to Hitler and continued to teach about Christianity's Jewish roots. During this period, he also came to see that Niebuhr had in fact won their earlier debate: Christians *do* have a responsibility to be involved in the world's affairs.

By 1936, Bonhoeffer was banned from speaking at German universities, and in 1937, the Gestapo closed his seminary in Finkenwalde. By this time, he was fully aware of the criminal nature of the Third Reich, and with his extensive contacts in foreign countries, he tried to make people aware of the dangers of letting Hitler go unchallenged. No one of any importance would listen.

In 1939 it became obvious that Bonhoeffer was in danger. Reinhold Niebuhr arranged to have an invitation issued to him and he returned in June of that year to New York, where he would be safe from Nazi persecution. But by July he realized he could not abandon his country to the Nazis and he returned to Germany. World War II began just a few months later with Germany's invasion of Poland. "I have no right," Bonhoeffer later wrote to Niebuhr, "to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."<sup>1</sup>

In order not to be drafted into the army, he started working for military intelligence. He'd gotten this job through highly placed enemies of Hitler whose goal it was to put an end to both his rule and to the war. In his position, Bonhoeffer was also able to get Jews out of Germany and into relative safety in Switzerland. Though not directly involved in attempts on Hitler's life, he had full knowledge of them and helped hide information about these attempts from the Gestapo. Bonhoeffer also continued to train and minister to young pastors of the Confessing Church until 1940 when all known confessing pastors were drafted into the army. Shortly after a second attempt on Hitler's life, Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he had earlier written that "When Christ calls a man, he bids him 'Come and die.'"<sup>2</sup> His commitment to these words would now be put to the test.

In prison, Bonhoeffer's main concern was his ministry to his fellow prisoners. "You can only learn what obedience is by obeying," he had said, and in prison, Dietrich continued his obedience to Christ.<sup>3</sup> He gained not only the respect of the other prisoners, but also the respect of his guards who actually apologized to him for having to lock the door to his cell, and who smuggled his papers out of prison. Bonhoeffer remained in prison in Berlin for the rest of 1943 and all of 1944. To welcome the New Year of Our Lord 1945 from prison, he wrote the beautiful poem *By Gracious Powers* – now included as a hymn in most Protestant hymnals. It is this hymn which we will sing as our prayer hymn today.

As allied troops advanced on Berlin, the Gestapo removed some prisoners from the city and began moving them from one concentration camp to another as winter 1945 gave way to spring. On Palm Sunday, on their way to Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, a couple of Dietrich's fellow prisoners asked him to conduct a worship service for them. He refused because one among their company was an atheist, and Dietrich wanted to do nothing that would exclude him. But even he asked Bonhoeffer to conduct worship, and so he did. It was the last service he would ever conduct. Just over two weeks later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, at the age of 39, was hanged for the crime of treason against the Third Reich. Three weeks later, Hitler was dead, and within a month the war in Europe had ended.

Even sixty years after the end of the war, the evil of the Third Reich is still the principle evil which challenges the belief of many in a loving God. Many people from this congregation fought to end the terror of that empire. In a very different way, so did Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Some of those who challenged Dietrich to return to Germany to help resist Hitler, themselves fled to other countries where they survived the war. Bonhoeffer decided to stay in Germany, where he faced not only the dangers of the Gestapo, but the agony of having to make difficult ethical choices. Can a Christian commit a sin in order to prevent an even greater sin from occurring? Should a follower of Jesus tell a lie in order to prevent the continuation of an even bigger lie? "What's worse than *doing* evil is actually *being* evil," he said, and "it's worse for a liar to tell the truth than for a lover of truth to lie."<sup>4</sup> In other words, he was willing to risk his own soul in order to put a stop to Hitler. If the death of Hitler would prevent the deaths of thousands – indeed *millions* – of innocent people, then Bonhoeffer was willing to participate in a conspiracy to end Hitler's life. If covering up his own activities or the activities of his co-conspirators could keep the German resistance going a while longer, then Bonhoeffer did not feel it was necessary to tell the Gestapo the truth.

To this day, seminarians around the world are required to read Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and his *Cost of Discipleship*. And to this day, his example helps strengthen those who have to make a choice between loyalty to their faith or loyalty to a political ideology. He also forces many of us to question the nature of servanthood, and the extent to which we might be willing to practice what we preach. Dietrich once asked, "Why does the Christian Church so often have to look on from the outside when the rest of the nation is celebrating?"<sup>5</sup> With this question he reminds all of us that 'our citizenship is in heaven, and that it is from there that we await a savior, Jesus Christ.'<sup>6</sup> This belief doesn't mean that we as Christians should not be involved in the events of the world, but that we're in the world as citizens of God's Realm. We must not look to our political leaders to express our faith for us and in whose successes we can celebrate our faith, but instead look to Jesus, who "is not concerned with success or failure but with the willing acceptance of God's judgment."<sup>7</sup>

– Sam L. Greening, Jr.  
©10 April 2005, Zanesville OH

<sup>1</sup> G. Leibholz, *Memoir* found in the Forward of the 1959 ed. of *The Cost of Discipleship*

<sup>2</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 89

<sup>3</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 78

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, p. 67

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 108

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 3:20

<sup>7</sup> *Ethics*, p. 79