

COSTLY GRACE EMBODIED
JOHN 12:20-33
A SERMON BY DEAN K. THOMPSON
Exploratory Weekend
Caldwell Chapel
October 2, 2009

Today is Exploratory Weekend. During this weekend, in manifold ways, it will be our joy to share with you travelers and visitors our profound belief that you will never walk alone as you explore your hopes, your callings, your vocational dreams. Today, we celebrate our pentecostal belief that the Spirit of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, walks before you, behind you, beside you, and breathes in you. Today, we celebrate the belief that you vocational explorers will never go anywhere that the Spirit of the risen Christ will not be there also.

This past spring, on Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009, Christians throughout the world celebrated the 75th Anniversary of the Theological Declaration of Barmen. Barmen is one of the 10 confessions in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions. The Barmen Declaration was written and approved on May 31, 1934, in Barmen, Germany, by courageous Reformed and Lutheran delegates. Calling themselves the Confessing Church, they bravely announced their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and as the one and only source of the church's life and obedience. Indeed, they offered their Barmen Declaration in order to stand up against the false claims of Nazism. And, as someone has said, "By calling on the church to trust and obey Jesus Christ alone and not to follow Adolf Hitler,"¹ many in the Confessing Church were expelled from their pastorates and their teachings posts. Moreover, some who stood up even lost their lives.

Today's sermon is about one of those who paid the ultimate price for standing up in the face of evil. The price of his life.

And today's sermon is also about us, all of us, as we also try to do our best to live and love as those who, by the power of Christ's Spirit, would yearn to stand up in the face of evil.

Our intriguing text from the 12th chapter of John's gospel is actually a Holy Week passage. It is Passover time in Jerusalem and, looking backward, we are eerily aware that, for Jesus, the end of the road is just around the bend.

In this memorable encounter, we behold several Greeks—Gentile outsiders who are probably worldly pilgrims—as they approach a disciple of Jesus whose name is Philip. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” they say to Philip; and their words echo across the centuries. “....we wish to see Jesus.” “....we wish to see Jesus.” “....we wish to see Jesus.”

Today we, many of us, are aware that those same words are on small plaques attached to many pulpits in churches throughout this wonderful land. Sir, Ms., Madame, preacher, teacher, pastor, leader: “we wish to see Jesus.” And I need to admit to you that every time I step up to a pulpit and try to preach a sermon from God's word to the community of the word, I am always spooked, even overpowered, by those riveting words, “we wish to see Jesus.”

For through the sacred words of Scripture—words read, pondered and preached—people surely “wish to see Jesus.” Indeed, people yearn “for some of him to rub off on them.” That's what my friend Cynthia Campbell believes. She figures that, 2000 years ago, when the several Greek traveling outsiders approached Philip at Passover time in Jerusalem and said, “we wish to see Jesus,” what they really longed to see was this servant leader who not only practiced what he preached but who **was** what he preached. As Cynthia sees it, “They wanted to see a man whom they sensed had a new heart, who lived the new life. They wanted some of him to rub off on them.”²

Who is this Jesus who shows them and us the God-life? After Jesus receives word about the Greek inquirers, he offers a challenging sign through which they and we really see who he is as the God-life on earth. If you want some of me to rub off on you, he says, this is what must happen: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” In other words, we who wish to see Jesus must begin our quest by pouring ourselves out, and not by puffing ourselves up.

For 44 years, I have studied and revered someone who lived and died like that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an intriguing worldly inquirer who wished to see Jesus, and who grew and grew to become a profound pastor theologian and a brave servant leader during the horror years of Germany's Third Reich. He was

executed on the Nazi gallows at age 39 by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler 64 years ago, April 9, 1945, only three weeks before Adolf Hitler's suicide in a Berlin bunker.

Dietrich was an urbane, sensitive and brilliant German aristocrat. After his ordination to Christian ministry, at age 25, he taught a confirmation class of 50 boys in a Berlin slum. That experience became a symbol for his entire ministry of courageous servant leadership. His first meeting with the boys, he climbed a stairwell and he was pelted with garbage. His response? Why, he moved into their neighborhood and he won their friendship. Often and often, outstanding leaders bear the marks of that kind of humility.

Dietrich, his family and his friends were terribly offended by Hitler's rise to demonic power. They were appalled by a new verse that Hitler's devious pawns had added to the Christmas carol "Silent Night"—a verse about their dear Führer:

**Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright,
Only the Chancellor
steadfast in fight,
Watches o'er Germany by
day and night,
Always caring for us.³**

As Jesus Christ rubbed off on Dietrich, and as Dietrich spoke and ministered to his sick homeland, and as Hitler's brutal power increased, Dietrich's calm, prophetic, courageous truth-telling became a moral signature to behold. He delivered a lecture over Berlin radio, chastening his people for lusting after a leader who would become a "misleader," and declaring that the "leader who makes an idol of himself and his office makes a mockery of God."⁴ A few months later, he published a paper on the plight of German Jews. He was the first German Protestant theologian to step forward.

After Hitler's unspeakable persecution of the Jews escalated, Dietrich wrote these sobering words. "If a drunken driver is at the wheel, it is not just the minister's job to comfort the relations of those he has killed but if possible to seize the steering wheel."⁵ Then, precisely because of his love of peace, and his love of the other, and his love of the stranger, and his love of the outcast,

and his love of those who were suffering horrifically, Dietrich joined as a co-conspirator in the effort to murder Adolf Hitler. That is, he tried desperately to seize the steering wheel and to stop the drunken slaughter.

“...we wish to see Jesus,” the worldly Greek inquirers said to Philip the disciple centuries ago. During the years of Dietrich’s conspiracy and imprisonment, his smuggled writings bravely confessed that this is what it means to see Jesus and to have something of Jesus to rub off on a person.

Listen to his teachings:

- Ethics is learning to live in unity in the world. Ethics is our participation with Jesus Christ as he encounters the world. “Christ died for the world, and it is only in the midst of the world that Christ is Christ.” Furthermore, “there is no place in which the Christian can withdraw from the world....Belonging wholly to Christ,” Christians stand “at the same time wholly in the world.” Thus, the world cannot be divided into two kingdoms, the political and the religious “spheres.”⁶

Listen to Bonhoeffer again:

- “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church.” “We are fighting today for costly grace.” “Cheap grace is grace without Jesus Christ....” “Cheap grace means the justification of sin....”⁷

And again, one of Dietrich’s most repeated teachings:

- We must learn “to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer” rather than from the perspective of “personal good fortune.”⁸

Following his arrest by Hitler’s Gestapo killers, Dietrich was confined in several prisons for two years. There he survived and served as a compassionate pastor, especially to the younger prisoners. An admiring chaplain later confessed: “Often he was the pastor and I the prisoner.” Another captive remembered: Dietrich “always cheered me up and comforted me....He never tired of repeating that the only fight which is lost is that which we give up.”⁹

On the day before his martyrdom, concentration camp prisoners asked Dietrich to lead them in worship. He preached from Isaiah and 1st Peter: “And with his stripes we are healed,” and “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Then, they sang Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”: “The prince of darkness grim, We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure. The body they may kill. God’s truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever.” Then, two men appeared and shouted: “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready and come with us!” Then, before leaving to die, Dietrich asked a fellow prisoner, Payne Best, to deliver this message to a beloved mentor, George Kennedy Allen Bell, Bishop of Chichester: “This is the end – for me the beginning of life.”¹⁰

Later, in a tribute to his fallen hero, one of Dietrich’s best friends in the United States, Paul Lehmann, was heard to say: “Jesus Christ was always taking form in him’....”¹¹

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” says Jesus, “it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” I used to believe that truth-telling is easier than it really is – until Dietrich and his good friend, Pastor Martin Niemöller, taught me otherwise. Here is what they were like before they chose to bear much fruit. This is Dietrich’s confession.

**We saw the lie raise its head,
And we did not honour the truth.
We saw brethren in direst need
And feared only our own death.**¹²

No, it was not easy to stand up and be counted!

And this is Pastor Martin Niemöller’s famous self-depiction before choosing to stand up for the truth:

**In Germany they came first for the communists,
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up
because I wasn’t a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and
I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me, and by that time**

no one was left to speak up.¹³

Yet, praise the Spirit of Jesus Christ, they did stand up. They did! They stood up in the face of monstrous evil. Thus, six and one-half decades later, we are still inspired, indeed, overpowered by this picture of Pastor Niemöller, standing in a German pulpit and preaching these brave words to the Gestapo, eyeball to eyeball: “Christ is my Führer !” “Christ is my Führer !” “No more are we ready to keep silence... We must obey God rather than man.”

Yes, yes, yes; they did stand up. Why? How? Because Christ was indeed their Fuhrer, their leader, teacher, rabbi, and ultimate friend.

Therefore, we hope. We hope, with Paul Lehmann, that the God-life of Jesus will take form in us, and quicken us, and infuse us with the courage to stand up and to choose the truth and not the lie during our own ongoing and multiple journeys and explorations through life’s dangers, toils and snares. And, on this weekend of deep, deep vocational explorations, we hope and we pray, with each of you visiting explorers, that not one of us will ever walk alone. Yes, this is the miraculous hope of Pentecost; and this is the abiding hope of our ongoing Christian journey across the ages: as we walk through our valleys of the shadow of death and evil; and as we walk through our valleys of anxious decision-making and challenging choices, we will never be by ourselves. We will never be alone. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has seen to it: the Spirit of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, walks before us, behind us, beside us, and even breathes in us. This is our hope - from here to eternity. We will never walk alone. We will never walk alone.

And, by the power of the Holy Spirit, this is our prayer; this is your prayer, Explorers:

I am only one, but I am one.

I can’t do everything, but I can do something.

What I can do, I ought to do,

And what I ought to do,

By the grace of Jesus Christ,

I will do. Amen.

¹ From Book of Confessions, Study Edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 1999), 308.

² Cynthia M. Campbell, sermon, "In Dying We Are Born," Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, March 16, 1997.

³ See Richard Pierard, "An Age of Ideology," in Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 577.

⁴ Eberhard Bethge, Costly Grace (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 60-61.

⁵ Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, eds., I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 14 and 82.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 72, 73, 193-204, 293-295; and The Cost of Discipleship (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 35, 55.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 43, 45.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years," from Letters and Papers from Prison (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 17.

⁹ Harold Poelchau, "The Freedom of the Prisoner," in Zimmermann and Smith, 223; and J. Martin Bailey and Douglas Gilbert, The Steps of Bonhoeffer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 83.

¹⁰ Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 829-830. See also G.K.A. Bell, "The Church and the Resistance Movement," in Zimmermann and Smith, 209-210.

¹¹ Paul Lehmann, "Paradox of Discipleship," in Zimmerman and Smith, 45.

¹² From Bonhoeffer, "Night Voices in Tegel," Letters and Papers from Prison, 354.

¹³ Quoted in Christian Century, Vol. 101, No. 10, March 21-28, 1984, 296.