

The other, the Cross and Solidarity in Suffering

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In our quest for reconciliation we need to take seriously 'the other'. Joel Lawrence writes on this key theme in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the twentieth-century martyr, executed near the end of the Second World War because of his struggle against the Nazi regime.

At New Year 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his co-conspirators in the plot to assassinate Hitler in which he reflected on the last 10 tumultuous years in German history – 10 years under Nazi rule. These years were witnesses to dramatic happenings in Germany: the consolidation of power by Hitler, the church struggle, the establishment of racism by law, and the Second World War. In this letter, Bonhoeffer is struggling with his co-conspirators in the darkness of the time, trying to find a pathway forward when there is only a tangle of underbrush, encouraging himself and his friends onwards despite the lack of moral clarity in their actions. They have had to lie, to steal, to be unfaithful to their vows to the Fatherland, all in the attempt to kill

a fellow human being. Why did they choose this course?

Toward the end of the letter, Bonhoeffer writes, 'We have for once learned to see the great events of 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'. Why did these men choose to give away their security, their honour, their respectability, and eventually, their lives? Because they were forced to see the sufferings of others, and knew that to act responsibly in this time was to struggle

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer, prisoner and martyr of the 20th century.

on behalf of the sufferers. Bonhoeffer knew that he would either be guilty because of his action or because of his inaction, and his whole theological and ethical compass pointed him toward action on behalf of those who were suffering, to the detriment of himself.

9 April, 2005 marks the sixtieth anniversary of Bonhoeffer's death on a Nazi gallows. This article will reflect on Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering, and ask about the lessons to be learned as we face a very different world than Bonhoeffer's, but a world in which suffering continues to be an ever-present reality. I will highlight three aspects of Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering, and at the end will reflect on his influence, and draw three lessons from Bonhoeffer's life and theology.

Suffering for 'the other'

In order to understand Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering, we must understand the category of 'the other' in his theology, as this theme is present throughout his writings. In his earliest

work, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer analyzes the way in which humans are established as humans by being confronted by the ethical demand of the other. In his final, fragmentary works, published in English as *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer conceives of Christ as 'the Man for others' and states 'the church is not the church unless it exists for others.' Our lives are to model the life of Christ, who exists for the other, and who suffers for the sake of the other.

This existence 'for others' is the proper existence of human beings. As such, to become human in a world of suffering will entail that we struggle with and for the good of others. For Bonhoeffer, this meant struggling with and for the victims of Nazi ideology and the mechanisms of suffering that it produced. It meant exposing himself to pain and imprisonment, and eventually to death, because of the suffering of others. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, there could be no such thing as personal security when others were forced to suffer through the evil deeds of fellow human beings. The call to suffer is inherent in the Christian faith, because Christianity is a faith founded on the cross of Christ.

Bearing the Cross with Christ

We enter into the sufferings of the cross with a confidence in the God who calls us into the way of suffering. Bonhoeffer trusted in the righteousness of God, even

when all the signs taken from experience pointed to the contrary. In a sermon preached in 1938, Bonhoeffer said, ‘God is righteous, whether we understand his ways or not. God is righteous, whether he punishes and chastises us or whether he pardons us...We do not see it, but our faith must confess it: God alone is righteous’. Suffering must always be seen on the basis of the righteousness of God. If God’s righteousness is lost, then suffering is without hope and meaningless. We are called to suffer, but we suffer as those who trust in the ultimate righteousness of God, and who bear burdens trusting in the righteousness of God.

Because of this, Bonhoeffer had the freedom to enter into the results of drastic human evil, there to struggle as one who is obedient to Christ. We suffer for, and with, others in order to follow Christ, who himself entered into the suffering wrought by evil. In *After Ten Years*, Bonhoeffer writes, ‘Christ suffered as a free man alone, apart and in ignominy, in body and spirit; and since then many Christians have suffered with him’. Christ suffered of his own free will, as a responsible being who entered into suffering for the sake of healing. This is the call that he places on those who would follow him: to take up the cross as those who enter into the suffering of others in solidarity with them in their plight.

Bonhoeffer knew that he was called to follow the way of the cross and to struggle with the sufferers.

Hence, the pathway that all those who would follow the way Christ must walk will lead to the cross. The life of a follower of Christ is a life lived under the cross. But the cross of Christ is the place where peace and suffering, two seeming opposites, coincide. The cross, the place of the utmost suffering of Christ, is the place where the peace of God with man is established. Thus, when the follower of Christ is called to bear the cross, to live at the foot of the cross, she is called to a life of peace in the midst of suffering.

In a sermon on Romans 5.1-5, Bonhoeffer comments, ‘Peace is found beneath the cross...Here beneath the cross one finds “access to this grace in which we stand,” daily access to peace with God’. But Bonhoeffer continues by pointing out that Scripture will not allow us to stop at the peace of God. Instead, St Paul goes on to say that we must ‘boast in our sufferings’. Reflecting on this, Bonhoeffer said, ‘Whether we have really found God’s peace will be shown by how we deal with the sufferings that will come upon us...Those who acknowledge that they view suffering and tribulation in their own lives only as something hostile and evil can see from this very fact that they have not at all found peace with God’. This is the irony of the cross:

it is there that the peace of God is found, but it is also the place of utmost suffering. As such, those who are called by Christ to bear the cross should not be dismayed when the sufferings of life come upon them, but should bear them as sufferings that produce hope, through which the peace of God comes into their lives. We find peace with God as we enter into the struggle of the cross.

‘Only the suffering God can help’

Ultimately, the reason that we are called to struggle with those who suffer is that God has established himself in solidarity with our sufferings. Bonhoeffer offers us the God who suffers as a co-sufferer.

God himself has assumed solidarity with all human sufferers in the sufferings of his Son. Christ suffered the fullness of human suffering. As such, Bonhoeffer is able to write from his cell in prison, ‘Only the suffering God can help’. What we need in our suffering is not the God of transcendence who is above all suffering, but the God who came near to sufferers by entering into their struggle and pain and bore it in his body. Christ himself is one who knows the pain of suffering. This is not a platitude meant to make suffering bearable, but an offer of hope to those who suffer: the suffering God is the one who can help. He is with you in the depths of sorrow. He walks with us in the valley of the shadow of death. This does not mean

that evil will not touch us, but it does mean that Christ is with us as we struggle under evil.

This hope was evident in Bonhoeffer’s own darkest hour, as he was marched to the gallows at Flossenburg concentration camp. Before his hanging, Bonhoeffer spoke to an English officer who witnessed his death. He said, in hopefulness that belied the situation, ‘This is the end, for me, the beginning of life’. In the midst of suffering, in the darkness of the hour, Bonhoeffer held to the hope that is borne out of knowing that God in Christ has suffered, and he comforts all those who suffer.

The influence and lessons of Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer’s influence on theology over the last 60 years is undeniable. He has been adopted by theologians of all stripes, from the radical death of God theologians of the 1960s, to liberation, feminist, and black theologians, and conservative evangelical theologians. The influence of Bonhoeffer is undoubtedly due to the incompleteness of his theological project, leaving him open to various interpretations. But I suggest that it is also due to the honesty and depth of Bonhoeffer’s thought on the reality of struggle in our lives, and on the fact that Bonhoeffer truly entered into the struggle of his day. He did this with trepidation, with

uncertainty, and with a great deal of confusion. But he acted when most failed to act; he suffered when most chose security; he spoke when most remained silent. And because of this, Bonhoeffer provides an example of one who struggled on behalf of others. It is this example that has attracted and inspired many over the last 60 years.

I would highlight three lessons that we can take from Bonhoeffer's teaching on suffering and struggle:

► First, we must be willing to give up our security for the sake of those who suffer. In a world that speaks so much of security, what is a proper Christian attitude to personal security? We may not all be called to be martyrs for Christ's sake, in the sense of giving up our lives for others, but we are called to be martyrs in the original sense of the word: we are to be those who testify to Christ by bearing the cross of suffering for the sake of others.

► Second, our churches must become churches that exist for others. The whole life of Christ is a life of existing for the sake of others. This life is a model for what it means to be human. In order for us to become what God created us to be, we must be people who are

committed to the other. How can this be done as a church community? What demand does this make on our time and our resources? Bonhoeffer raises for us the challenge of become a church for others, because we worship a Lord who is the Man for others.

► Third, we must be people who not only suffer with others, but who allow others to suffer with us. Do we allow people into our own sufferings or do we put on a stiff upper lip? Are we open and honest people who allow God to suffer with us and allow God's people to enter our sufferings? God, in Christ, suffered and died on the cross to establish solidarity with us in our sufferings. Do we open ourselves to his presence as a co-sufferer, and as a healer in the midst of our suffering? Do we allow the peace of God that comes through suffering, and the hope that it produces, to invade our souls?

Obviously, much else can be said about Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering. But I hope that what I have said here has offered encouragement, and that Bonhoeffer's theology will yet inspire people to bear the cross for the sake of others, trusting in God to give hope in a world that desperately needs it.