

Malachi 3:1-4  
Philippians 1:3-11  
Luke 3:1-6  
December 2, 2009

### Life Together

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a young pastor in Germany during the rise of the Nazi party. He was actually lecturing at Union Theological Seminary in New York City when things got really bad in Germany, but rather than accept their invitation to remain safely in the United States, he said he couldn't participate in the peaceful rebuilding of Germany that would come later if he didn't live through the suffering and struggle of the present Germany. So, he went home. You may know of him because he died in a concentration camp after being implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

As far as I can tell he's not mentioned in Valkyrie, so the movie's historically inaccurate. It was the Christians who opposed Hitler, not the politicians, and not all the Christians. But the ones who did, like Bonhoeffer, found themselves treated like all of Hitler's other "undesirables," sprayed with poison gas, killed in mass shootings, or hanging from gallows. Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenburg three weeks before the Soviets liberated the camp.

I'm telling you all this because Bonhoeffer wrote a little book called, Life Together. He wrote it while he was living in an underground community established by The Confessing Church in opposition to the German Christian Church, Hitler's church. In other words, before his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer lived in the Lutheran seminary equivalent of the Wesley House. He lived with a group of like minded Christians who ate and laughed together, worshipped and prayed together, debated theology and struggled with their faith together. Life Together.

In the book he wrote about the joy and the frustration of sharing close quarters with other people, even people you like. He wrote about the real sense of community that comes when you are held accountable by the very people with whom you are most vulnerable.

He wrote about a lot of things you might recognize in our own lives together. But on the first page of a book about life together, he wrote this: “it is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians.”

“How I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus,” wrote Paul to the Christians in Philippi while he sat in prison, probably in Rome, but maybe in Caesarea or Ephesus. It doesn’t really matter where he was imprisoned, only that he was not enjoying the privilege of living among other Christians.

Well, these were tough times for both Paul and Bonhoeffer; late first century and early twentieth century. Things are better now. In fact, we have 9 people who live together as Christians and struggle with some of those mundane matters that Bonhoeffer faced:

- Who left the dirty dishes on the counter?
- Who’s supposed to fix the broken window?
- Why is the thermostat turned down so low?

More of us surround that group of nine contributing to both their happiness, when we pick up our dirty dishes, and their unhappiness, when we track mud into the house. The privilege of living among other Christians is all ours, sometimes more ours than we want it to be...

I want to suggest to you that in this last week of the fall semester, the second week of Advent, the tension of moving in and out of Christian community is greater than we might think. If you’re thrown in jail in the first century and commanded to proclaim Caesar is Lord rather than Jesus is Lord, you understand the difference, the privilege of living among other Christians. If you are arrested in Nazi Germany for refusing to salute the Fuehrer because you don’t believe the Fuehrer reads the Bible the same way you do, you understand the difference, the privilege of living among other Christians. But what about us? What do we think about Christian community, about the claims of the Gospel, about the meaning of Advent—about our preparation for the Day of the Lord?

Last week I struggled with my parents over the minutia of health care reform. This week the president decided to send more troops to Afghanistan. Next week you will be consumed by final exams and the push for the end of the semester. None of this seems to have very much to do with Christian community. Almost all of it has to do with individual security.

My parents are pushing 70; they want the security of seeing a doctor when they need to see a doctor. My brother retires from the Marine Corps next weekend; he wants the security of not being part of the troop build-up for Afghanistan. My students, you, need to excel on tests and papers; you want the security of a firm foundation for whatever next step you will take in life. And I want my parents, my siblings, and my students to be secure. We are driven to self sufficiency and lured by the claim of rugged individualism.

Paul is sitting in prison where he ought to be consumed with his own security. Of course, we don't want him to bow down to Caesar, but we wouldn't begrudge him a few self-indulgences in order to make the best of a bad situation. He could whine about the food or the size of his cell; we'd expect that. He could complain about the miscarriage of justice and his almost certain death sentence; we'd expect that. But instead of being preoccupied with his own fate, Paul proclaims the Gospel. He points people right back to Christian community. From the beginning of the letter he shifts the attention from himself to the community: "I thank my God every time I remember YOU, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of YOU..."

Paul reminds the community that their love for one another displays God's righteousness much more accurately than his own self preservation. In other words, living faithfully for the community is more important than dying comfortably by yourself. I think Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison would reflect the same truth. We, too, are constantly pulled between the poles of living faithfully or dying comfortably, even if our lives are not as dramatic as Paul's or Bonhoeffer's.

Paul offers a formula for faithful living in the opening of this letter to the Philippians. He doesn't whine about the food in prison or complain about the injustice of Roman law. If we had it in Greek, Paul's words would strike home for us just as they did for the people of Philippi. In Greek, grace is χάρις. Paul tells the Philippians that they all share with him in God's grace— χάρις, right after he tells them I give thanks to God for you. I give thanks is ευχαριστώ. Do you hear it? Eucharist. The word is practically the same, wrapping grace and thanks into one package, making life together a continuous interchange between receiving grace and giving thanks, and made whole in the body of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.