

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer and The Confessing Church”

Sermon for “Voices” Clergy Retreat at Camp Christian, Gordon, Georgia

Saturday, February 2, 2013

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 3, 2013

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 4: 20-30 1 Corinthians 13

Luke 4: 20-30

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

²³ He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ ” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the

time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Story...

“Story is how we know ourselves.”[1]

We get to know ourselves and one another better through our stories.

We have stories of confession and forgiveness,

rejection and repentance, pain and sorrow and hope

Each of us has a story of grace and anger, of heartache and reconciliation.

We all have a story;

we all have something to share and release,

and there is something we need to hear and receive.

I am going to share some stories of confession and truth and reconciliation,

and you have my blessing to drift away and daydream,

to let your mind wander as you think of your own stories.

In the summer of 2010,

First Christian Church of Decatur blessed me and my family with a sabbatical.

For part of the sabbatical my son Henry, who was 20, and I

travelled to Mozambique, Swaziland, and South Africa.

Beautiful nations, beautiful people, beautiful experiences of hospitality.

We were in Cape Town, South Africa for a week.

On Tuesday we had lunch in a cafe, then toured St George's Cathedral

-- also known as People's Cathedral because it has always been integrated,

even during Apartheid.

Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the pastor there

when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Tutu helped initiate the process of helping South Africa heal

in the wake of the cultural and economic ravages of Apartheid.

The Truth and Reconciliation process brought people together,

victims and victimizers, to share their stories,

to listen to each other for the first time.

Henry and I found out Tutu was going to lead mass on Friday at 7:15 AM.

Whoa! We vowed to go back to worship at dawn on Friday!

Our host family very graciously got up extra early and made the arrangements

so we could make it to St. George's Cathedral for worship.

The chapel was packed with around 40 or so people,

and there was Archbishop Tutu leading the service.

We slipped out to find a couple chairs and then settled down to worship

God.

Now, I had met Desmond Tutu twenty-eight years ago,

back when I was a divinity student at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.

In 1984, the seminary honored Tutu when he preached there.

As an elected officer of the seminary student body

it was my privilege to greet and escort him.

Meanwhile, at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town,

after Desmond Tutu led us through the liturgy of the Lord's Table,

he invited us to come forward and partake.

As I approached him I was initially thinking about Tutu as a man,

as a hero, as a liberator of the oppressed

and reconciler of broken relationships.

However, when I drew closer to the Lord's Table and Desmond Tutu

a deeper sense of appreciation took over;

I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the love of God

and the sacrifice of Christ so that all might be saved and redeemed.

Since Henry and I had been the last to enter the chapel, we were the first to leave.

Former Archbishop Tutu was at the door to say good bye to the worshipers.

I introduced myself to him, mentioning that we'd met at Union Seminary in 1984,

and then I introduced him to Henry.

Tutu looked keenly at Henry and then asked me, "Does he look now like you did then?"

I answered, "Yes."

Suddenly Tutu raised his hands and arms high in the air

and erupted in a loud exclamation of joy and recognition, "Oooooo!"

Thirty years ago, in 1983, Union Seminary held a conference

to honor the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had both studied and taught at the seminary,

so to help tell his story and honor his faithful ministries of grace

the seminary flew in one of his former students to speak.

His name was Eberhard Bethge.

Bethge had continued to do Bonhoeffer's reconciling work in Germany after WWII,

reconstructing German and British relationships,

rebuilding trust between Christians and Jews,

reconciling their traumatic past and present reality.

That day I just happened to sit down at a cafeteria table directly across

from Bethge.

Being the extroverted 23-year-old I was, I introduced myself.

“James Calvert...” said Bethge. “Calvert... I had a young man work with me

to help rebuild Germany, maybe 30 years ago. Do you know a George Calvert?”

I said, “Yes, he is my father.”

“Oooooo!” he exclaimed.

You see, in 1950 young Americans from all walks of life

found themselves serving a Living God in Europe,

helping to rebuild homes and shops and schools

as well as to reconcile relationships torn apart

by bombs and bullets, hatred and anti-Semitism.

Bethge and Calvert and so many more were following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

They gave of themselves for a great cause – truth and reconciliation,

both of which have their genesis in honest confession and forgiving grace.

They were influenced by a young Jesus of Nazareth

as well as another young man who preached and practiced such a faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, Germany.

He studied in Berlin and later in NYC.

While studying and later teaching at Union Theological Seminary in NY,

Bonhoeffer worshiped God at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

He was deeply moved and influenced by the faith walk of people

who were oppressed and ostracized simply for the color of their skin,

yet who also welcomed him into the church's life

with gracious hospitality.

Bonhoeffer published "The Cost of Discipleship",

and his lectures were turned into books

entitled "Life Together" "Creation and Fall" and "Temptation".

During the 1930s the Nazi German government seduced, conspired, manipulated

and persuaded the German Lutheran Church to yoke itself with the Nazi Party.

We don't have to stretch our imaginations to picture this;

we have witnessed with our own eyes in our nation

church bodies align themselves with political parties.

In the 1930s and 40s, the German Lutheran Church

supported and condoned anti-Semitic practices, as well as

the oppression of homosexuals, the mentally infirm, and foreigners.

Against the advice and pleading of his friends and fellow Christians,

Bonhoeffer chose to return to Germany in 1939,

a year when anyone who could get out was crossing the borders.

He returned to Germany and helped give energy and theological grounding

to a God movement called to counteract the established church.

The movement of God's people was known as The Confessing Church.

The Confessing Church repents of its sins, seeks out the ways of reconciliation,

and aligns itself with the hurting, rather than doing the hurting.

The Confessing Church gave German Christians an alternative –

albeit a dangerous one, one as risky as the cost of discipleship --

yet an alternative nevertheless

to a politically co-opted and theologically corrupt church.

The Confessing Church preached love while smuggling Jews to freedom in Switzerland.

They created an underground seminary,

which is where Eberhard Bethge learned to be a servant leader.

Ultimately they came to the conclusion that Adolf Hitler must die for

Germans to live.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer joined the Valkyrie conspiracy to assassinate Hitler.

The plot failed; Bonhoeffer was arrested;

and he was put into a concentration camp in Dachau.

Bonhoeffer's missives were compiled into a book: "Letters and Writings from Prison"

He wrote: *"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil.*

God will not hold us guiltless.

Not to speak is to speak.

Not to act is to act."

In April 1945, a few weeks before Dachau was liberated by American troops,

Bonhoeffer was hanged.

His last act was to serve Holy Communion to his fellow prisoners and guards.

His story of hopeful living in the midst of horrors and hatred

is yet another connection for us to the love and grace of God

These are stories of sin and separation, confession and reconciliation.

Stories of our sinfulness and sorry behavior

can shape us, brand us, and even destroy us.

And surely they will...if we let them, if we succumb to fear, if we give up and give in.

Stories of perseverance and courage

in the face of incredible odds

serve to strengthen and sustain us for the journey.

They remind us who we are and whose we are.

The Good News is that you and I are not defined by sin;

we are defined by God, who loves us.

“Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Rom. 8: 38)

This week we are sharing a message with the world that The Confessing Church lives.

Our church marquee reads:

IF YOU HAVE BEEN HURT,

ABUSED OR MISUSED

BY THE CHURCH,

WE ARE SORRY

This is what it means to be The Confessing Church in 2013.

We feel your pain, and we stand beside you.

We confess our sin and participation in our neighbor's pain and loss

and whatever may have angered our brothers and sisters

or cast folks out of the circle,

a circle in Christ's eyes that has no boundaries or limits.

The only time I ever saw my mother Buffy Calvert break the law

was in 1970, when the film *Love Story* was in theaters.

The movie poster read, "*Love Means Never Having to Say You Are Sorry.*"

Buffy took a No. 2 pencil and lightly crossed out "Never" then wrote above it "Always".

Yes, love means always having to say you are sorry!

"Love is patient; love is kind;

love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.” (1 Cor. 13: 4-8)

In the film *Rocky III*,

Clubber Lang, played by Mr. T, is asked by a reporter

for his prediction of his upcoming fight with Rocky Balboa.

Clubber looks into the camera and says, “Pain.”

Boxers fully expect to inflict and receive pain.

No one should expect such an experience in or from Christ’s Body.

Church goes and the world around us expect Christians to offer and practice grace.

Why would anyone expect – or receive – pain from a people called to embody grace?

And yet we have, and do, hurt the ones we are called to heal.

The Confessing Church is called to address its role in inflicting pain,

and to stand with the victims

as well as to seek out ways to forgiveness.

We who have been called to be servants and servant leaders

know from experience that the following are true:

1. We have been hurt by congregations of Christians.
2. We have hurt Christians individually and collectively.
3. We have been hurt by secular attacks on the Church of Jesus Christ.
4. We have hurt our neighbors in the world through the actions of churches.

One day a while back I was feeling the bitter sting

of having been the victim of a pointed attack

by a group of Christians in a communal collective called a committee.

Stunned, I turned to Rev. Zena McAdams for help and comfort.

At the time Zena was serving as our interim regional minister.

One of the things Zena McAdams said to me was,

“In the ministry there are a thousand licks

(and here she flicked her wrist like a whip),

but they come one at a time.”

This week a beloved church member came to me

and bravely, sadly shared how hurt he felt

that no one, including his beloved pastor,

had reached out to him when he was absent with an illness.

Who did call on him?

Not me. Not us. His secular, un-churched friends did, though.

I felt his pain of yet another lash from a Christian,

and I felt my face flush with shame.

You and I and all of us together have much for which to say we are sorry.

We have much to confess, much to repent, to turn away from and toward God.

The Good News is that by the grace of God

we are forgiven of our confessed sins.

We have the power to forgive ourselves and one another in the holy name of Jesus.

With this power and new life in Christ

we have the capacity and calling to change and be transformed.

We need to become and be The Confessing Church today.

From the meanness of gossip in church parking lots

(which they say is where board decisions are made!)

to the misinterpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah

as justification for exclusivity...

From the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition

to the atrocities of modern genocides condoned by faith communities...

From the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and many of the disciples,

which were Temple-supported and Roman-executed,

to today's martyrdom of Christians

in China, Syria, Nigeria and elsewhere...

From the churches that carry signs at funerals that read, "God Hates Fags"

to the much more subtle yet just as deadly ways

churches neglect, reject, or deject the lost, the last and the least...

...we have much to confess.

We have many stories to share and to receive

as we journey toward truth and reconciliation.

On the way

and on the other side of confessing our sin and professing our faith

we may look into the heavens

and deep into our souls

and ask God for a prediction of how our
story will pan out.

God will respond with one
word: "Grace."

All power be to the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Extra material:

"All life is a call and a response.

God calls us into creation.

God calls us into life.

God calls each of us into the world to bring joy

and renew hope and speak out for justice.

God calls us to love,

to plunge ourselves into the hurts and the horrors,

to give ourselves fully to those who are in need.

God calls us to be present to those who are without love.

God calls you and even me.

God calls us to dance,

to move in our joy and sadness,

shedding our self-consciousness

and clothing ourselves with peace.

No longer can we afford to wait.

We are builders of the Body of Christ.”

--Adapted from Bread for the Journey, ed. by Ruth C. Duck

[1] Rev. Linda McCrae, Lecture with Dr. Rick Lowery, Transforming the Church.Org, 2012.