

4.1.2020 Lenten mid-week homily
Ephesians 5:1-2, John 13:34-35

Pastor Timothy McKenzie
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

“The Image of Christ”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

The theme of this year’s Lenten midweek series has been “Staying Close to Jesus.” In addition to scripture, each week we have focused on the voices of Christian writers from the history of the church who also sought to stay close to Jesus. This week is the final week of this series, and today we hear from a German Christian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). At the end of this homily there is also a brief passage from his book *Discipleship* as well as some suggested readings about his life and theology.

Bonhoeffer wrote the book *Discipleship* against the background of being an underground seminary president and professor of the Confessing Church that resisted the pro-Nazi German State Church. The book, *Discipleship*, is largely an exploration of the Sermon on the Mount and the theme of following the call of Christ. The concluding chapter of the book is titled, “The Image of Christ.” The Confessing Church adopted a confession known as the *Barmen Declaration* in 1934, which was mainly written by Karl Barth. The first two articles (there were a total of six) read, “1) The source of revelation is only the Word of God - Jesus Christ. Any other possible sources (earthly powers, for example) will not be accepted. 2) Jesus Christ is the only Lord of all aspects of personal life. There should be no other authority.” What was at issue was placing the state and its leader above the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The reason Christ became human was to restore the divine image in humanity that had been lost due to sin. Bonhoeffer wrote, “In Christ’s incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance.”

This, of course, meant that Christ’s incarnation was for all humanity since God gave his only begotten Son for the world (John 3:16). The attack on Jewish people and all other “least of the people” was an attack on Christ himself. Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Ethics*, “An expulsion of the Jews from the west must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew.” For Bonhoeffer, the restoration of the image of God means that “as we participate in Christ, the

incarnate one, we also have a part in all of humanity, which is borne by him.”

As people who share community with Christ, we are also as followers of Christ, called to share human community with all people. We are called to “‘walk just as he walked’ (1 John 2:6), ‘act as he acted’ (John 13:15), ‘love as he loved’ (Eph. 5:2, John 13:34; 15:12), ‘forgive as he forgave’ (Col. 3:13), ‘have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 2:5), follow the example he left for us (1 Pet. 2:21), and lose our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, just as he lost his life for our sake (1 John 3:16).”

The obvious implication is that in following Christ and seeking to be Christ-like in our lives, we have a moral responsibility to our neighbor, no matter how different they may seem from us. We remember that Christ also died and was raised for them, as for us. Bonhoeffer quotes Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.”

When we imitate the one who already dwells in us through faith, we are seeking to fulfill his commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” The Christian’s moral responsibility to the neighbor is not simply a “feel good thing” that we do in a post-modern secular world, rather, Christian responsibility to the neighbor flows from the realization that Christ also shares my neighbor’s humanity. Just as I am “the least of these,” the indwelling of Christ in me through faith causes me to realize that Christ also died for the one next to me, who is also the “least of these.”

We have journeyed this Lent with the theme of “staying close to Jesus.” We began with Thomas à Kempis’ book *The Imitation of Christ*,” and we end with Bonhoeffer’s encouragement for us to be imitators of God as followers of Jesus. Perhaps more than any other moment in our lifetimes we see our common humanity in our sisters and brothers around the world who are also fighting the same pandemic as we are, and experiencing our shared common humanity. These sisters and brothers are blessed with different languages, cultures, and religions, and yet, as Christians, we remember the Father sent his Son into the world for the world, that the world might believe in him.

In John’s gospel, at the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples, Jesus washed their feet and gave them a new commandment to love one another, saying, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” In imitating the love of Jesus, we “lose our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, just as he lost his life for our sake.” Let us love one another as Jesus loves us, so the world might come to believe in him. Amen

Lent 5 Midweek reading resources: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

From *Discipleship* (1937)

“The Image of Christ”

To be conformed to the image of Christ is not an ideal of realizing some kind of similarity with Christ which we are asked to attain. It is not we who change ourselves into the image of God. Rather, it is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which seeks to take shape within us (Gal. 4:19). It is Christ’s own form which seeks to manifest itself in us. Christ does not cease working in us until he has changed us into Christ’s own image. Our goal is to be shaped into the entire *form* of the *incarnate*, the *crucified*, and the *risen one*.

Christ has taken on this *human form*. He became a human being like us. In his humanity and his lowliness we recognize our own form. He became like human beings, so that we would be like him. In Christ’s incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance. In community with the incarnate one, we are once again given our true humanity. Inasmuch as we participate in Christ, the incarnate one, we also have a part in all of humanity, which is borne by him. Since we know ourselves to be accepted and borne within the humanity of Jesus, our new humanity now also consists in bearing the troubles and the sins of all others.

It now becomes understandable that the New Testament calls us again and again to be “like Christ” (καθὼς Χριστός). We are to be like Christ, because we have already been shaped into the image of Christ. Only because we bear Christ’s image already can Christ be the “example” whom we follow. Only because he himself already lives his true life in us can we “walk just as he walked” (1 John 2:6), “act as he acted” (John 13:15), “love as he loved” (Eph. 5:2, John 13:34; 15:12), “forgive as he forgave” (Col. 3:13), “have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5), follow the example he left for us (1 Pet. 2:21), and lose our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, just as he lost his life for our sake (1 John 3:16). Only because he was as we are can we be as he was. Only because we already are made like him can we be “like Christ.” Since we have been formed in the image of Christ, we can live following his example. On this basis, we are now actually able to do those deeds, and in the simplicity of discipleship, to live life in the likeness of Christ. Here simple obedience to the word takes place. I no longer cast even a single glance on my own life, on the new image I bear. For in the same moment that I would desire to see it, I would lose it. For it is, of course, merely the mirror reflection of the image of Jesus Christ upon which I look without ceasing. The followers look only to the one whom they follow. But now the final word about those who as disciples bear the image of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Jesus Christ, and who have been transformed into the image of God, is that they are called to be “imitators of God.” The follower of Jesus is the imitator of God. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1).

From Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Discipleship*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. (Originally published in German: *Nachfolge*, Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1937)

Book recommendations:

The complete works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are available through Fortress Press. Though Bonhoeffer research is ongoing, the massive biography by Bonhoeffer's former student and friend, Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (revised edition, 2000) remains the standard work. There are also many recent works about Bonhoeffer available in English (more than can be easily listed here). The following books are excellent introductions to Bonhoeffer's life and work. Clements, Keith, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publication, 2015.

Lawrence, Joel, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: T & T Clark, 2010.

Marsh, Charles, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York: Vintage Books, 2014.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran theologian historically significant for his support of ecumenism and his view of Christianity's role in a secular world. Bonhoeffer studied with Adolf von Harnack at the University of Berlin, and earned Doctor of Theology in 1927. Too young for ordination, during 1930-1931 he studied at Union Seminary in New York, and became a lecturer at the University of Berlin after his return to Germany in 1931. At this time he also began international ecumenical work. After his ordination in 1933, he became involved in the "Church Struggle" in Germany, and a member of the "Confessing Church" (*Bekennende Kirche*) that fought against the German Evangelical Church (the state church of the Third Reich). Bonhoeffer became the head of an underground seminary at Finkenwalde (1935-37), which was eventually closed by the Gestapo, and in 1938 the Gestapo banned him from Berlin. In 1938, he was invited to Union Seminary and traveled there only to immediately return to Germany, writing, "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right 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." In 1941 he was further forbidden to publish. Under cover of working for the Abwehr, he served as a double agent and courier for the German resistance movement to reveal its existence and intentions to the Western Allies through ecumenical contacts in Europe. He was arrested on April 5, 1943 and imprisoned in Tegel Prison outside Berlin. Implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler, he was eventually moved to Buchenwald concentration camp, and then to Flossenberg concentration camp, where he was executed on April 9, 1945. His posthumous *Letters and Papers from Prison* has left perhaps the most profound and enduring outline of his thoughts about Christian life in a modern and secular world. The *ELW* contains a hymn written by Bonhoeffer, (#626) "By Gracious Powers."