

The Cost of Discipleship

Luke 4:21-30

February 1, 2004

The people in the synagogue came to hear one of their own. They were prepared for a homecoming--a kind of family reunion. They saw Jesus as a part of their community, one who belonged to their comfortable congregational circle. Jesus would have none of it. He tried to shatter their assumptions about who a prophet speaks to, who a prophet helps, who is included, who should be the recipient of love. And so he reminded them of what their own scriptures say. Elijah went to the widow of Zarephath when there were Jewish widows who could have used his help. Elisha healed the Gentile leper Naaman, while there were plenty of Jewish lepers who didn't get healed. The congregation didn't like hearing this. A writer has said their reaction must have been something like this: "You are the Jewish Messiah, and you are going to the Gentiles? We are God's chosen people. We have followed the law, endured the persecution, guarded the traditions. Now it is going to be offered to them? The writer goes on to say, "To the Jewish faithful Jesus has quickly destroyed the notion of privilege. (The notion that says, 'Grace is good when it is extended to me, but I'm not so sure my neighbor deserves it.')

It is still difficult for many to accept that God loves everyone.

No, the congregation didn't like hearing this. In fact, it made them so angry that they tried to kill Jesus.

Unfortunately, this kind of narrowness and prejudice isn't limited to those Nazarenes. It has survived through the centuries. It still crops up today. But fortunately, there have been saints thought out history who have fought this kind of narrowness and prejudice. And, because we are in the middle of a study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and because Wednesday is his birthday, I am especially reminded of the narrowness and prejudice that he had to fight in Germany. Naziism was based on race. The Aryan race was thought to be better, purer, more evolved. Soon after Hitler came to power the Nazis began to put pressure on the German Church to "purify" itself by expelling all pastors of Jewish descent. They didn't stop there, but that is how they began. Bonhoeffer and his colleagues would have none of it. Meeting in Barmen, in May of 1934, they broke with the German Christian Church and formed the Confessing Church. They wrote the Barmen Declaration to

declare what they believed and why they could not remain in a church dominated by Nazism.

The German government didn't like this. In fact, it made them very angry that they began systematically to suppress the Confessing Church and its leaders.

The Barmen Declaration echoes Jesus' message--the circle has to be drawn wider because of who is God and who God is. Years ago J.B. Phillips wrote a book called Your God is too Small. That was the problem with the Nazarenes. That was the problem with the Nazis. If a people's God isn't high enough, big enough their God won't include everybody. If God is the Jewish law, or the Jewish people, or Hitler, or the German state, or America, or our denomination, or our church, then that God will exclude some people, then that God is an idol.

Jeremiah knew about this. Jeremiah was called, not just to be a prophet to Judah, but to the nations. Remember Jeremiah tried to tell his King not to fight the enemy. God had told Jeremiah that if they fought Judah would lose. But the king didn't want to hear that, the king found such talk to be treasonous. So Jeremiah suffered for speaking God's message. So did Jesus. So did Bonhoeffer.

Jeremiah didn't just speak God's message, he acted God's message. Jesus didn't just speak about healing and freeing people, he did it. Bonhoeffer didn't just speak against the state, he acted. He and his brother-in-law falsified documents to allow 14 Jews to escape from Germany. Later, even though he was a pacifist, he joined a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was discovered, imprisoned and, just a few days before the end of the war, executed.

The day before he died, at the request of his fellow prisoners, Bonhoeffer held a worship service. He prayed and spoke about the texts of the day: "With his stripes we are healed," Isaiah 53:5 and "Blessed by 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." (I Peter 1:3) As he was taken away, his last words to his friends were. "This is the end--for me the beginning of life."

As we gather at this table, let us remember, as Bonhoeffer did, and as our

Lord taught, that no one is excluded. Let us remember, as Bonhoeffer did , that our Lord died and was resurrected so that we might truly live. Let us remember with gratitude saints like Bonhoeffer, who were true and faithful disciples. Let us remember, as Bonhoeffer did, that the life of true and faithful discipleship is one that worships the true God and none other, true discipleship calls us to act for the poor, the oppressed, the outsiders, true discipleship is costly.