

Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Resource for Preaching in Lent

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Very few preachers think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a resource for preaching. We remember his older contemporaries, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, and may consider them resources for preaching, but we tend to think of Bonhoeffer as an ethicist and martyr. Rarely does his work have an impact on preaching beyond the occasional sermon illustration. But, during the years 1935-1939, he taught at an underground seminary in Finkenwalde and homiletics was one of the subjects he taught regularly. Hitler closed the seminary in 1937, but Bonhoeffer continued to teach for two more years. His published lectures on preaching offer more than a synthesis of his ethics and theology; they offer a way of reflecting on the preaching task within a local congregation.¹

For Bonhoeffer, the purpose of preaching was to establish and build up the community in its Christian identity and its Christian mission within the world.² Preaching was not primarily to entertain, not primarily to instruct, not primarily to comfort believers, but to lead them together, into becoming a new kind of community. At the seminary in Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer sought to create an intentional community among the seminarians, an experimental community devoted to living together in grace, united not by any natural sympathies, but only by their common faith. This is the goal of all Christian community, according to Bonhoeffer, for believers to “meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation.”³

While this may sound cozy to us, consider Bonhoeffer in Germany’s Confessing Church, teaching his underground students that their Christian identity and vocation was essentially to bear witness to one another and the world, even when that witness was contrary to the state. The Christian, he claimed, is ever hungry for the living Word of God in Christ, which can only come from some source outside the believer himself or herself. “God has put this Word into the mouth of men [sic] in order that it may be communicated to other men [sic].”⁴ Bonhoeffer believed that too many Christians sought out some ideal notion of religious fellowship, which he characterized as safe and congenial like-mindedness. True Christian community, he claimed, is that we are bound in spite of ourselves, by Christ, and that believers who seek some pleasant camaraderie, or the false “glow of fellowship” will be deceived.⁵

Notice how different this understanding of preaching is from our contemporary notions of “teaching the Bible,” or “growing the church” or “meeting the felt needs of the congregation.” In Bonhoeffer’s understanding, the true needs of the community are fairly constant and simple: the community needs to understand that individuality and personal interest recede in Christ. Speaking the good news to one another is one of the primary ways this community is formed, since such an activity is a constant reminder of the “other” and directs the believer outward away from his or her own needs, to tend the needs of others. Christians can never “live by their own words or deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together – the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.”⁶ This understanding of dying to self and becoming

part of a community could be a powerful Lenten theme, a discipline of turning the gaze from the individual to the needs of the worldwide community.⁷

Obviously, the purpose of preaching and the content of preaching are necessarily connected. While Bonhoeffer certainly urged rigorous Bible study, and preaching from texts, he only encouraged “biblical” preaching because he assumed that it revealed Christ and the history of salvation. Bluntly, preaching the Bible for its own sake would have been a strange notion to Bonhoeffer, who advised *lectio continua*, for personal and family devotions, as well as for preaching. “Holy Scripture does not consist of individual passages; it is a unit and is intended to be used as such.”⁸ This is certainly a serious consideration during the Lenten preaching cycle, when the lectionary offers the most textual variety (and the least internal textual continuity) of the entire Christian year.

Bonhoeffer tends to use “Word of God” not to refer solely to the Bible, but to the living Word, or the presence of Christ that is disclosed in the Bible *and* in preaching. His theology of the Word is a classical Reformation understanding that the written Word is completed only when preached and heard.

He and Barth would have differed on this point, we must assume, since Barth considered the Scriptures to be the source and purpose of preaching. Most folks assume that preaching is all about the Bible. If preaching is a vehicle, then the Bible is the payload preachers carry. The assumption is so rigidly assumed that if you ask a room full of earnest homiletics students what it is they are supposed to preach, they will almost always mutter something about the scripture. They would agree with Barth’s assertion that “the preacher must preach the Bible and nothing else.”⁹

Bonhoeffer’s understanding is more nuanced; we preach the Christ who is in the Bible, but not just the Bible for its own sake.¹⁰ If Barth considered preaching to be the means *through which the Bible was disclosed*, Bonhoeffer believed that preaching the Bible was one means *through which Christ was disclosed* or as the “presence in words of the God who is not portrayable.”¹¹ His lectures on preaching also make provision for non-biblical preaching as a legitimate means of conveying Christ, provided the preaching is consistent with the Christ disclosed within the Bible. Bonhoeffer had a strong sacramental understanding of preaching, as a means through which Christ was incarnated:

The proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself . . . The preached Christ is both the Historical One and the Present One. He is the access to the historical Jesus. Therefore the proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else, something that lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through the congregation as the Word. His flesh is our flesh and our flesh is his flesh. This also means that in the incarnation the new humanity is established.¹²

Bonhoeffer considered preaching a sacramental act, which discloses the living Christ through ordinary human language. In this respect, God is not only humbled by coming into human flesh, but further humbled, or even “humiliated” in the act of preaching itself. “...the Word of God has really entered into the humiliation of the word of man.”¹³ For this reason, Bonhoeffer became increasingly adamant that preachers should use secular language and not religious language in sermons, to demonstrate the

incarnation of Christ into ordinary human life, and not limited to church experience or ecclesial language. He called for a renewal of language, even language that might seem shockingly secular and “religionless.” It is unlikely that Bonhoeffer would have been sympathetic to current trends toward the promotion of cultural-linguistic communities of faith with self-consciously churchy language.

It is not for us to prophesy the day (though the day will come) when men will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming – as was Jesus’ language; it will shock people and yet overcome them by its power.¹⁴

Bonhoeffer thought a new approach was mandatory, since the world had come of age, and no longer realized its need for God. For him, the world had reached the age of accountability, and must shuck off the pretense of superstitious religion (*deus ex machina*) as a precondition of faith. Many liberal theologians had made God into a gap-filling God, good only to answer “limit-questions” at the edges of human experience. God, for Bonhoeffer, was the absolute center of faithful life, and not something for the philosophical periphery. He was increasingly frustrated with Barth’s biblical positivism, which seemed irrelevant to him, and disappointed in Bultmann’s existentialism, which seemed to promote self-absorption. He charged that existentialists “. . . demonstrate to secure, contented, and happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate and simply unwilling to admit that it is in a predicament about which it knows nothing. . .”¹⁵ Bonhoeffer thought that Bultmann’s demythologizing did not go far enough, since it only reinterpreted the faith in personal terms. “Hasn’t the individualistic question about personal salvation almost completely left us all?” he wrote.¹⁶ Bonhoeffer’s hope was to renew preaching and all forms of witnessing the faith to reclaim the notion of a future realm of human righteousness, located within socio-historical reality. “The Christian hope of resurrection . . . sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way . . . [with] no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself, he must drink the earthly cup to its dregs. . .”¹⁷ For Bonhoeffer, the Christian who truly belongs to Christ stands fully in the world. This was what he considered “worldly Christianity.” “Worldly preaching” revealed the Christ who offers this vision of redeemed and redemptive life. He was less an apologist for the church than for the living Christ.

This Christ, incarnate as Word in preaching and prayer and witness, is not the Christ of traditional evangelical piety, or even of early liberalism. This Christ is not interested in condemnation, or easy solace, or even personal salvation. Bonhoeffer considered it a mistake to assume that all preaching was to convict sinners of their sins so that they might be converted. “This is the attitude I’m contending against,” he wrote from prison. “When Jesus blessed sinners, they were real sinners, but Jesus did not make everyone a sinner first. He called them away from their sin, not into their sin.”¹⁸ Our own preaching, he contended, was not for conversion, but for witness. “. . . only God through God’s Word can call anyone to repentance . . . leave the converting to God.”¹⁹ He compared popular evangelistic preaching to manipulation and propaganda similar to the propagandistic speeches and rallies of the Third Reich.²⁰

We come full circle back to the purpose of regular congregational preaching: to

form the people in Christ, to disclose the presence of Christ as the living Word, to throw believers back into the world come of age, to witness in ordinary but liberating language, to be faithful without being churchy or concerned about their own spiritual status, to be committed to a new way of living in human community both inside and outside of the ecclesial community. For Bonhoeffer, the purpose of preaching was in the service of Christ and of radical discipleship, not in the service of self-perpetuating institutions or individual salvation.

Between the Finkenwalde years and months in Tegel Prison, Bonhoeffer's attitude toward the institutional church grew even more jaded, exactly as his commitment to radical discipleship deepened. He referred to the church as penultimate, and the destiny of the world as ultimate. In introductory notes to *The Cost of Discipleship*, G. Leibholz summarized Bonhoeffer's understanding of discipleship which remains constant throughout his ministry:

To Bonhoeffer, Christianity was not the concern of the believing, pious soul who shuts himself up and keep himself within the bounds of the sacramental sphere. No, according to him Christianity has its place in this world and the Church as the Body of Christ, and the fellowship to him can only be the visible Church. Man must follow him who has served and passed through this world as the living, the dying and the risen Lord. Therefore, wherever it pleases God to put man in this world, the Christian must be ready for martyrdom and death.²¹

By now it should be clearer where Bonhoeffer's theology in general, and his homiletic theology in particular, can enrich Lenten preaching. Contemporary books on preaching and the Christian Year lament the fact that preachers persist in preaching penitential themes during the Sundays in Lent. Traditionally, the six Sundays of Lent were celebrated as analogues of Easter, while the remaining non-Sabbath days were reserved for more somber and penitential reflection. Somewhere along the line, the distinctiveness of Sundays got blurred into the solemnity of the penitential season, with the result that preachers seem to think they must preach six Sundays of gloom and self-examination during Lent.

Good news! Bonhoeffer's understanding of preaching and the historical understanding of the Lenten Sundays actually coincide. If Sundays are supposed to be Easter analogues, and Bonhoeffer says we are to disclose the Living Word, these two notions conspire to subvert much of the penitential self-absorbed wallowing we have come to expect. We do not have to preach to draw the hearers into their own sin, but to draw them away from it, and into the service of the risen Christ. If part of the Lenten discipline is to draw us into the mind of Christ, as a community, then perhaps we should be preaching to disclose the One who suffered on behalf of the world, not in order to straighten out his own spiritual life or to save himself from damnation. For those preachers who lament the spiritual superficiality of their flocks at the same time they lament a concomitant lack of social concern, Bonhoeffer's theology of preaching the living Word comes as a breath of fresh air. How paltry giving up chocolate or caffeine seems next to this kind of radical discipleship!

The other particularly good news for preachers preparing for Lenten preaching in the Lukan year is that Luke's gospel (along with Acts) is the most socially radical of

all the gospels.²² I would recommend preaching from the gospel texts, and to avoid the temptation to use Hebrew Bible texts to preach a prophecy/fulfillment type of Christology. Overall, preachers should avoid spiritualizing the Lukan texts and reducing them to personal piety and matters of the heart. Another excellent strategy for honoring a Bonhoefferian commitment would be to preach about Jesus in the present tense, rather than in the past tense. Preachers will be surprised at what a dramatic difference this present-tense shift will make in their own interpretive approaches. If we agree with Bonhoeffer that Christ is risen and present to the world, we should avoid relegating Christ to the past-tense strategies of more traditional exposition/application approaches.

The first Sunday we have the Lukan temptation story, a vivid portrayal of the domination systems of the world and Jesus' refusal to play power politics or capitulate to a market economy. Imagine the difference if (instead of making it all about personal piety) we disclosed the kind of world that would result from the ecumenical Christian community's refusal to support the current domination systems in our own "world come of age."

For the second Sunday, the Lukan gospel offers one of two options. The first one is the "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!" pericope. Here, Jesus identifies himself with the prophetic ministry of the Hebrew Bible, and cites the long religious history of martyrdom. Here is Bonhoeffer's living Christ, stalking prophetically through the congregation, calling disciples to challenge even religious power structures. (Please, no Jew-bashing!) The second option for this Sunday is the Transfiguration, locating Jesus as the prophet par excellence, flanked by Moses and Elijah. The text is a specific call not to tarry in private moments of spiritual giddiness, but to get "back to the world" and to discipleship.

The third Sunday is the Lukan passage about the barren fig tree, and Jesus' reprieve to give it time to bear fruit. It is a decidedly apocalyptic parable, but consistent with Bonhoeffer's understanding that repentance bears real fruit. Preachers are advised not to spiritualize all the ethics out of this one, but to locate hearers in a "present age" where grace and repentance are still available to the believers, who can look forward to a future of fruit-bearing witness.

The fourth Sunday is the Lukan parable of the Prodigal. Notice all the prodigality (extravagance) in the parable. The profligacy of the son is matched by the generosity of the father. Extravagant sin is met with extravagant grace. When grace meets sin, it is a celebration! Just like the resurrection. The father is just like Bonhoeffer's Jesus, pulling the sinner into abundant life and not allowing even a moment of wallowing in penitential guilt. Again, this reminder: don't burden the parable with personal piety notions, but emphasize the community's possibilities for radical extravagant discipleship.

The fifth Sunday is a lectionary "glitch," reverting to the Johannine anointing at Bethany, but surely one of the most radical texts in the entire New Testament, if preached with Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic. The woman at Bethany anoints Jesus as an odd kind of King: one headed for trial, arrest, and public execution. For anyone who considers Bonhoeffer a kind of saint, the analogies are astonishing. His humility and resistance in the face of persecution was recognized by only a few of his contemporaries. Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." While we may want to appreciate the "little" spiritual death involved in conversion or

commitment, the real socio-political realities of radical communal discipleship should not be avoided. The preacher should use Bonhoeffer more as a hermeneutic approach here than as an exemplar. Congregations do not generally find saints easy to identify with.

The Passion/Palm Sunday reading is the trial and execution of Jesus, the living Word of God. My colleague, David Buttrick, is fond of pointing out that Jesus probably wasn't executed because he was a Boy Scout, but because his vision of a just world was a real social and political threat to the systems of domination. Luke's gospel makes quite a big deal out of the fact that the Risen Christ is the same one who was crucified. Over and over, Luke hits that note. The same one, the same one, the same one. So, the Risen Living Word, is the same one who challenges the world come of age with a new vision of humanity. We are, as the community of believers, called to commit our common ministry to the same Lord, not as solo vigilantes for Jesus, but as a community with explicit shared commitments to justice.

Preaching establishes the possibilities of a new and redeemed world. The living Word, the crucified and risen One, strides among the twenty-first century believers, settled comfortably in the pews, and calls us to follow him into the world come of age.

Notes

¹ Clyde E. Fant, ed., *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

² Ibid, 101.

³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (1938), (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 23.

⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁵ Ibid, 26, 39.

⁶ Ibid, 28.

⁷ Popular views of Bonhoeffer overlook his commitment to the ecumenical movement. He was the International Youth Secretary for Germany and Eastern Europe (an ecumenical position) when he delivered a lecture called, "The Church is Dead," immediately before he joined the Confessing Church movement. His comments about "the Church" should be understood in this way, and not as comments strictly about local parishes or the Lutheran Church.

⁸ Ibid, 51.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel*, trans. B. E. Hooke (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 43.

¹⁰ It is helpful to remember that Barth considered revelation to be located exclusively within the Bible, and that Bultmann assumed somewhat existential hermeneutical approaches. Bonhoeffer seems to have a different and more "social" hermeneutic and is not particularly devoted to notions of authentic selfhood (Bultmann) or to an exclusively past-tense revelation (Barth).

¹¹ *Worldly Preaching*, 142.

¹² Ibid, 101. Where Bonhoeffer refers to "the historical Jesus" we should assume he means the Jesus disclosed in the Bible. This is more consistent with his scholarship than the notion that he meant the scholars searching for "the historical Jesus."

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, intro. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966), 53.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1953, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 300. Bonhoeffer's articulation of religionless Christianity and renewed language takes its sharpest form during the last year of his life. Some may speculate that he was growing discouraged with the Church, but I take it to suggest that his time in prison allowed him to consider the possibilities of Christian witness in new ways.

¹⁵ Ibid, 326.

¹⁶ Ibid, 286.

¹⁷ Ibid, 336-7.

¹⁸ Ibid, 341.

¹⁹ *Worldly Preaching*, 135.

²⁰ *Worldly Preaching*, 135.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) trans. R. H. Fuller, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 24.

²² Preachers will be well served by the work of two fine homileticians. David Buttrick's *Speaking Parables* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), and Fred Craddock's *Luke, Interpretation Series* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) will get at the Lukan social critiques in ways consistent with Bonhoeffer's "worldly" Christianity.