

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 24B, Sept 13, 2015
Mark 8:27-38**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

In the late 1930's Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about God's grace in the context of a church struggling with how to respond to National Socialism in Nazi Germany. The basic differentiation he made was between "cheap grace," and "costly grace." "Cheap grace," he wrote, "means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient..." He goes on for awhile, finally concluding that "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." (45-7) Bonhoeffer believed that Christian faith was no faith at all unless it was lived by following Jesus' call to discipleship, hence the title of his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. His deep convictions led him to oppose his government and while he left for a time, he returned to Germany, even at the risk of his life, to teach and preach against the Nazi Regime. He spent a couple of years as a political prisoner before being executed just days before his concentration camp was liberated by the Allied forces.

Coming from such an extreme circumstance, it's not so hard to imagine why his theology is so dramatic and insistent... so uncompromising. Bonhoeffer focussed not on an intellectual or abstract confession of faith, but rather a robust, active faith of following Jesus. He described such a faith as characterized by costly grace, writing: "Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life." (47) Bonhoeffer lived and died this costly grace as he refused to recant his opposition to Nazism, and defied the Gestapo.

Roughly 70 years later, Diana Butler Bass, a researcher and writer about revitalizing mainline churches, wrote in her book *The Practicing Congregation*: "As I look back at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, I realize that as a young adult I wanted authentic Christianity, coherence of message and practice, and the transforming power of God in community." (58) She also realized that her personal longing for coherent and transforming faith was not an isolated one, but rather part of "a larger cultural hunger in which many people were seeking a meaningful way of life." Having discovered this "corporate longing for meaningful Christian discipleship," she spent 3 years researching vital mainline churches who were reforming themselves, and being transformed, by putting an increased emphasis on Christian discipleship through practices like daily prayer, hospitality, communal care, worship, and service. Her work points to the importance of finding greater intention in the practice of our traditional faith by seeking, asking and knocking, as Bonhoeffer wrote. It is a challenge to established churches because it means that we have to examine our tradition, "the way we do things," seek the Gospel anew, and boldly follow Christ's call of costly grace.

This is the call we here from Jesus in our roller coaster of a Gospel story today. It begins innocently enough, on the way to some villages, when Jesus asks about the latest gossip: “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples offer a variety of answers when Jesus ups the ante, making the question personal and direct: “But who do you say that I am?” All of a sudden a general inquiry and casual conversation gets real and it’s Peter who steps up and confesses his faith: “You are the Messiah,” he answers. It is “the first correct human statement about Jesus’ identity in the Gospel.” (NIB, 622) Prior to this moment, it was only demons who shouted out Jesus’ identity and who Jesus silenced with a rebuke. But this time Jesus’ identity is spoken by one of his closest disciples and so this moment, this passage, is a turning point in the Gospel. “You are the Messiah,” Peter confesses and while it might seem like such a great, a triumphant moment might deserve some moment of praise, maybe a toast or some other appropriate celebration... instead, Jesus orders them to tell nobody. He rebukes them to silence.

And then Jesus immediately teaches them: “that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again.” He says it all quite openly, the narrator tells us. It is, again, Peter, who responds, taking Jesus aside to rebuke him. The story doesn’t tell us Peter’s words... but perhaps we can imagine: “Don’t say that Jesus... everything is going to be okay... you’re going to be fine... we’re all going to be fine.” Or maybe Peter was brave enough to really say it: “You’re scaring us, Jesus... we don’t want to hear about suffering or death... so knock it off!” In the presence of someone facing into such a fate, or the possibility of such a fate, most of us react much like Peter. To rebuke is to silence... please don’t talk about it.

When one of the main characters in the once popular TV show “Sex and the City,” got breast cancer, they explored this very reaction. Over drinks one night, Samantha talks with her friend Carrie about her frustration and fear about going bald and looking like “a sick person”. Carrie keeps trying to reassure her that her blip of bad luck is over. But, Samantha protests: “What if it’s not over? What if it comes back? I could die Carrie.” Carrie remains confident: “You’re not going anywhere...” she says. Finally, Samantha pleads: “Carrie, please. Let me talk about what I’m afraid of. Please.” Carrie’s voice over acknowledges the struggle: “The denial part of me wanted to say ‘you’ll be fine.’ Instead, I said, ‘Ok, I’m here.’”

Nobody wants to talk about death and even fewer people want to acknowledge the suffering that so often accompanies it. I saw a woman on a news report this week say how she didn’t want her children to have to take care of her through dementia the way she did for her father. Instead, she wants to choose, through neat and clean doctor-assisted suicide, when and how she will die. When she no longer has a productive life, she wants to be killed. Our consumer culture has gotten to the point that human life is only valued for its productivity, as though there were nothing inherently valuable and worthy in a human being, in a human life. The fear of losing control of that life has begun to trump the fear of death.

I wonder if Jesus was afraid of the suffering and dying that he knew was coming, and wanted to talk about it? Regardless, Jesus had to know that the disciples would be afraid, but even so, Jesus persevered in his mission of proclaiming the abundance of life beyond death - the freedom that comes when fear no longer holds sway. Jesus turns Peter’s rebuke, Peter’s demand for silence, around with his own rebuke: “Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims with

teaching and with healing is a kingdom not of fear but of faith. Setting our minds on divine things means fighting through fear, even the fear of suffering or death... even the fear of talking about suffering and death.

Jesus calls a crowd to join the disciples and goes on to take his already frightening teaching to a whole other level: "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." It is a wonder that anybody at all stayed around. Not only was Jesus going to speak of his own fate - a predictable fate given what happens when one opposes a totalitarian regime. But he extended such a fate to those who chose to follow in his way. This is the hard call to discipleship that Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew all too well. He could have stayed in the safety of exile in the US but the call of Christ to follow, to stand up for life and light and love... had him return to Germany and it cost him his life.

Of course, the reality is that none of us get out of this alive. We will all suffer in this life - some more than others... some for a longer time than others - and we will all die one day. What if we took up Christ's call - in practical and meaningful ways - by facing into the suffering and death in our lives and in those around us? Could we find coherence of message and practice in how we live our faith, and discover the transforming power of God in our community and beyond, by caring for one another and for others in need, as we face the end-of life? This is what I'd like to explore later this month with anyone whose interest is piqued. You'll see a note in the bulletin with the details.

Bonhoeffer knew all too well that Jesus' deep and hard call to discipleship was about costly grace: "costly because it costs [us our lives]... grace because it gives [us] the only true life." (47) Butler Bass learned that following this call to authentic and coherent faith is the way to transformation and vitality. May we live in this costly grace: seeking this Gospel, asking for this gift and knocking at the door of God's presence. And as we follow Christ's call, may we find our fear turned into faith; our silence into praise; and our doubt transformed into joy.