

Shape Shifters: Dietrich Bonhoeffer
From *The Cloud of Unknowing*

All month, we've been talking on these Sunday mornings about *shape shifters*—people whose thinking and reflecting and understanding of God have made them changemakers for us. They've shifted the way *we* think about God. We've talked about Phyllis Tickle, who put history and the current social landscape into a big picture of what a new and still-emerging Christianity might look like. We talked about Richard Rohr, who says, 'Pay attention to your life, because the things that happen to you—that make you fall deeply in love or that cause you to suffer—those are the moments that hold God's presence for you, and the seeds of what you are becoming.' Last week Pastor Sam talked about Dolores Williams, and her challenge to us to remember that the stories of our tradition look very different when you look at them from diverse life experiences. Williams speaks particularly for black women, whose view from the underside of power gives them a wholly different perspective on who God is, what the stories in the Bible are saying to us, what God might be doing in the world now.

Today we talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In some ways Bonhoeffer belongs in an entirely different category from the theologians we've mentioned so far. In an SAT question—the one that asks, 'Which of these is not like all the rest?'—you would separate Bonhoeffer from a list of thinkers about progressive Christian faith. But Bonhoeffer is an important figure in 20th century Christianity, and you should know him. We all should. His life and story are a powerful statement of how God might be working among us today, and of what a faithful response to the world looks like.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, in Germany. He was a twin, the sixth child of eight, born into a family of wealth and privilege. The Bonhoeffer family weren't churchgoers, but like just about everyone in Germany at that time, they considered themselves Christian; that was the religion of their country.

The Germany of Bonhoeffer's childhood had been shaped by its defeat in World War I. The Treaty of Versailles did everything it could to subdue and humiliate a country that the Allies feared would bring the world to war again. And...we know how that went. The German Kaiser was replaced by a fragile, incompetent democracy, paving the way for the rise of a new and power-hungry regime of nationalists. A charismatic leader, Adolph Hitler, knew exactly how to exploit the sense of victimization that many Germans felt, their suspicion of outsiders, their Christianized culture. In his public speeches, Hitler used words that sounded right in their ears; he talked about re-building 'the inner strength and health of the German people'. The *salvation* of Germany was at hand, he said; their nation was about to be *resurrected*. He was a *prophet*, a restorer of traditional values.

This was the environment in which Bonhoeffer decided, early in his life, that he wanted to be a theologian. Christian theology is a long and distinguished intellectual tradition in Germany; seminary students in America still read a lot of German theologians as they study the history of Christian thought. But Bonhoeffer's career choice wasn't about church; it was an attraction to the truth-seeking of an academic discipline. And Bonhoeffer was brilliant. He earned two doctorates

by the time he was 23. He developed a reputation early on, for a very principled and rigorous understanding of who God is, how to read the Bible, what God requires of human beings.

During his graduate studies, Bonhoeffer spent a year at Union Seminary in New York. Union was—and still is—the center of gravity for progressive Christian theologians in the U.S. At Union, Bonhoeffer studied with Reinhold Niebuhr, who taught something Bonhoeffer had not heard before: that the purpose of Christian theology and ethics is not just to please God, but to change the world for the better. But in general, Bonhoeffer found American churches and theology undisciplined, lazy even—until he visited an African-American church. There, in the black church, he found fervor, energy; a clear and absolute dependence on the active presence of God. It brought his own faith and sense of justice to life. He couldn't get over the contrast between the faithfulness of black people, former slaves, still often treated poorly by American society, and the soft, fuzzy Christianity of powerful white institutions.

During that year in New York, Bonhoeffer became a pacifist. He became convinced that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was not meant to paint some impossible ideal, but a picture meant to be *lived*: a life of non-violence particularly. The human task is to live with humility, generosity and love, trusting that God will make all things right. The Christian must stay focused on God, he believed, especially on the way of Jesus. Government and human institutions will do their jobs; they can never compete with the power of God that's at work in silent and invisible, always internal ways.

But after a year away, Bonhoeffer returned to a Germany that alarmed him. Hitler's regime had turned up the heat on its 'Germany first' rallying cry by pointing at Jews, naming anyone with Jewish ancestry a problem for the country's economic and social prosperity. First there was a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses; then Jews were prohibited from holding civil service jobs; and then...more. More hatred, more targeting, more state-sanctioned violence.

For a while, Bonhoeffer focused only on his theological work. He led a confirmation class. He went to London and led churches there, just moved out of the reach of a government going the wrong direction. With others, he started a seminary that trained new pastors. But increasingly, he could not separate his understanding of God's will from what he saw happening in his country.

So Bonhoeffer turned toward more public action. He helped organize a movement of clergy to protest the ways the language of Christianity was being distorted and abused. In a small town called Barmen, they gathered to declare the Church's independence from government control. They published a document called the Barmen Declaration. But nothing changed.

In June 1939, just as Hitler invaded Austria to carry his vision beyond Germany's borders, Bonhoeffer was drafted. He fled, went back to Union Seminary, where friends had quickly set up a teaching fellowship to help him escape the draft. He lasted twenty-six days. From the moment he arrived in New York, Bonhoeffer felt, deep in his bones, a call to be back in Germany, whatever that would mean for him. He wrote to a friend, "The question is not 'What is it to do good?' The question is 'What does God require of us at this moment?' I know what I must choose. And I know I cannot make that choice and protect my own security."

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, where his friends and family members were already organized in active resistance to the government. He faced straight into his own theological and ethical dilemma: He knew his commitment to a God who loves peace and justice. He knew his Bible's

words about submission to human government. But if he was going to be true to this God, he had to take action that violated some of his earlier convictions. No matter what you believe in principle, he realized, you live in whatever life holds *now*.

Bonhoeffer joined the anti-government conspiracy. They arranged for dozens of Jews to escape from Germany. He lobbied the British Parliament to assist in overturning the Hitler regime. And he participated, actively, in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

In July 1944, they acted. One of Bonhoeffer's associates carried into the room where Hitler was meeting with his senior advisors and generals a briefcase with a bomb inside. He laid the case on the floor. Someone else slid it closer to Hitler's chair. The bomb went off. Several people in the room were killed. But they had not calculated the thickness of the wood table in front of Hitler. Hitler was only wounded. Like any good despot, he took the opportunity to declare himself invulnerable. He vowed revenge.

Bonhoeffer and the others were quickly arrested and imprisoned. In April 1945, after it was already clear that Germany had lost the war, they were tried, found guilty, condemned to death. Bonhoeffer presented no defense. On April 9, Bonhoeffer was marched to the gallows of a concentration camp and hanged. So were two of his brothers and two brothers-in-law.

Bonhoeffer wrote several books over his life, but the one that mattered most to him, his masterpiece, is called, simply, *Ethics*. He wrote, 'The will of God is not a system of rules established from the outset. It is something new and different in each different situation in life...The ethical life is not grounded in a set of principles, but in openness to God's demand on us at any given moment. Acting ethically is always an act of faith *in this moment*.'

In a letter he wrote from prison, he said, 'Only by living completely in this world, living unreservedly life's responsibilities and successes and failures, taking into account not only our own sufferings but those of others, people who have been forgotten, only then does one learn to have faith.'

When I was in college, I spent months reading and re-reading another book of Bonhoeffer's, called *The Cost of Discipleship*. The book contrasts 'costly grace'—the self-sacrifice God made when Jesus died—with 'cheap grace', the way we live most of the time, mindless about the demand of God on our lives. The book is a call to a more traditional, orthodox Christianity than what I practice now. But I loved that book. In my youthful idealism and evangelical zeal, the idea of grace costing God something I needed to repay called me to a more rigorous and self-disciplined faith, a life set apart from the ordinariness of everyday routines.

As I look back, I think I knew nothing then about how hard or how complicated life can be. How much surer I was then that I knew what's right, what God asks of me and of everyone else.

Bishop Desmond Tutu said once, as he reflected on Bonhoeffer's life, 'We hold onto our sense of rightness by the skin of our teeth.' Bonhoeffer's story, his lifelong dance with his faith—sometimes holding tight to the principles and beliefs he knew, then letting go so he could take hold of what a conscious life in this world asked of him, his understanding that trying to know and live by God's will can often feel precarious, insecure—this is the life I too am called to. I think it's the life we're *all* called to.

May we rise to that call.