

Mercy, Not Sacrifice (Ash Wednesday Sermon)

Rev. Jerry L. Folk

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who opposed Adolph Hitler and Nazism. This cost him his freedom and his life. He was hanged on April 9, 1945, less than a month before the end of WWII. One of Bonhoeffer's great griefs during his years of resistance was the weakness of the German church's resistance to Nazism. Oh there was some resistance. Many pastors and congregations broke with the national church, which had been completely taken over by the so-called "German Christians," who were trying to "reform" the church by getting rid of the Old Testament, claiming that Jesus wasn't a Jew but a great champion of the Aryan race, and proclaiming Adolph Hitler as the new Messiah. These pastors and churches formed the Confessing Church which resisted these efforts of the Nazis to turn the church into an instrument to promote German domination. But the Confessing Church's resistance did not go nearly far enough for Bonhoeffer. The Confessing Church resisted the Nazi's religious program, but not their political program to exterminate the Jews, murder homosexuals, euthanize anyone who had a physical or mental handicap, and enslave inferior races like the Poles and the Slavs and the Russians. Bonhoeffer believed that fighting for the Church was not enough. If it wanted to have any connection to Jesus, the Church would have to fight for the victims of Hitler's murderous and genocidal policies. "Anyone who does not cry out for the Jews has no right to sing pious chants in church," he declared.

I begin with this story, because this is pretty much what Isaiah is saying in tonight's reading. The people of Israel in his time think they are very good people and that they are on very good terms with God, because they are very religious. They go to church, they put on sack cloth and ashes and humble themselves in acts of repentance, they pray and fast. They talk about God and heaven a whole lot. But what they don't realize is that God doesn't care much about any of this. What God cares about is how we live together here on earth, how we treat each other. What God cares about is justice, mercy and love. "What does God require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God," the prophet Micah asks. "God desires mercy, not sacrifice," Jesus tells the Pharisees when they criticize his disciples for breaking the Sabbath law. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to care for orphans and widows in their distress," the author of the Letter of James writes. This is precisely what the Israelites in Isaiah's time did not understand. "You are oppressing your workers. You are quarreling with each other. You are getting into fist fights with one another," the prophet tells them. Or as we might say today, "You're gunning each other down on the streets" And at the same time, "you put on sack cloth and smear yourself with ashes. You humble yourselves in the public square. Do you think that's the kind of fast I want? What I want you to fast from is injustice, oppression, exploitation. What I want you to do is share your bread

with the hungry, your clothes with the naked and your homes with the homeless poor.” The problem with the Confessing Church in Bonhoeffer’s time was similar. It didn’t oppress the poor or exploit the workers, but it did not speak up against the murderous and criminal policies of the Nazi government. Like the people of Isaiah’s time, the Confessing Church seemed to think it was enough to get religion, get theology right.

What about us? We’re not oppressing people and we don’t have horrors like those of Nazism to stand up to. But sometimes we do embrace the false idea that what God is concerned about is heaven and religion and that God has handed over this world to the secular economic, political or cultural powers. We sometimes accept the idea that our faith has nothing to do with these “worldly” matters. It’s just there to help us get to heaven. But the fact is that, as long as we are here on this earth, God is more concerned about how we live together and how we treat each other here and now than about how religious we are. What God wants from us is that we care about how what we do or others do or what government or business or the other institutions of our society do will affect the lives and well being of people. What God wants from us is that we do all we can, personally and as citizens, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and shelter the homeless poor.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that this text should be appointed for Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of Lent, a season during which we think more than usual about religious acts like fasting and praying and alms giving. But there’s a lot of wisdom in this choice, because this reading reminds us that Lent, at its heart, is not about religion. Whatever we do or do not do this Lent, whatever we give up or take on is not to make us more religious, more pious, more holy, but to make us more just, more caring, more compassionate, more generous, more like God. Let’s keep this in mind as we begin our Lenten journey. Amen.