

“Faith as risk or the risk of Faith” a sermon based on Matthew 25:21-40, preached at the evening service at Knox Church Dunedin on 19 November 2017.

When I was a University student I heard for the first time at church the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer and a little about his life.

It led me to read a remarkable book “Letters and Papers from Prison”.

When I read a commentary on the gospel today which highlighted how fear had led the single-talented slave not to risk his talent and instead to bury it, I immediately remembered words from the book I read over 40 years ago.

Bonhoeffer suggested that faith inevitably involves risk. It is that I want to speak about tonight, risk and Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer wrestled with safety and risk.

The person who made a film about him said this in an interview:

I think in 1934 when things got very difficult, he left; he went to England. He took the safe way out as things are getting more and more tense in Germany for the churches, and he's having to make decisions. He's disappointed with the way the church is going at the time. He goes to England and becomes a pastor in the German church just outside of London. It's safer there. He's corresponding back and forth to Germany. He's reading the German papers. He's staying up on what's happening. He's offering his ideas, but he's safe. He's sort of out of the mix of it.

In 1939, when he makes that famous second trip from Germany back to the United States, he gets on that boat, and you can almost feel the hesitancy and the trepidation, but he does... It was the last boat before America entered the war ... And then he gets the last boat coming back from the United States to Germany, which is almost as if the script is being written for his life when you think about it ... this was a human being who went through stages of his life when he made decisions that he was proud of and decisions that he was not so proud of, but he kept going and kept opening himself constantly to the will of God.

This is what he wrote about that decision:

Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security.

Bonhoeffer wrote these words:

“I discovered later, and I’m still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith.”

Bonhoeffer could not hide from what was happening around him. He could not stay away from what his country was suffering. He could not avoid what he saw happening to his church.

All around he was breathing the air of crisis such that for him it became a matter of life and death. He saw his beloved Lutheran Church become indecisive and compliant, become the German church and sacrifice itself to Hitler.

He became part of a confessing church that was determined to be free of the power of the Third Reich.

He wrote this in one of his letters:

“A decision must be made at some point, and it’s no good waiting indefinitely for a sign from heaven that will solve the difficulty without further trouble. Even the ecumenical movement has to make up its mind and is therefore subject to error, like everything human. But to procrastinate and prevaricate simply because you’re afraid of erring, when others—I mean our brethren in Germany—must make infinitely more difficult decisions every day, seems to me almost to run counter to love. To delay or fail to make decisions may be more sinful than to make wrong decisions out of faith and love.”

That last sentence is worth long consideration. Risk avoidance may be more harmful, more unloving, less faithful, than taking the risk in faith and love and making a wrong decision. We often have to make a hard decision where both directions are painful.

Doing nothing may be worse than making a mistake – that is partly what the parable suggests.

What is often important is the sense of moving forward, of actually making a decision, then of moving to the next decision, then to the next decision, learning from the mistake that was made, sometimes modifying the result of the mistake that was made.

It is certainly true of the Church. The church that drifts, decision-less, passive, fearful, lacking in confidence, not speaking out, can lose the talent it has been given.

In faith, when we are invited to step out of the boat with Peter, when we are invited to walk to Emmaus with an unknown person who proves to be Jesus, when we are asked to give up the fishing that kept us fed, when we leave home with Abraham and Sarah, the gospel is always on the side of taking the risk, counting the cost to be sure, being realistic about the cost, but taking the risk.

That is faith.

Bonhoeffer wrote about living a life of costly grace rather than cheap grace. Excuse the male language of the era.

“Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

The call ...

To let go of the pursuits, possessions, pleasures, safety, and security of this world in order to follow Jesus wherever he leads, no matter what it costs.

In the words of Jim Elliot,
“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Bonhoeffer again “There is no way to peace along the way of safety. Peace is the great adventure. It has to be dared.” Bonhoeffer would say that there is no way to peace along the way to security.

What is true of peace, is true also of faith, and many other aspects of life.

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