|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Bonhoeffer in a Time of Responsibility** April 16 – It Did Not Go as Planned April 23 – How Did This Come to Be? **April 30 – Are We Still of Any Use?** May 7 – Only the Suffering God Can HelpDr. Wayne Whitson Floyd, presenter6:00 pm ST JAMES EPISCOPAL PARISH |  |

**Are we still of any use?**

“After Ten Years” was a 14-page reflection that Bonhoeffer wrote to his dear friend and colleague Eberhard Bethge and a few others at Christmas 1942, barely three months before he would be imprisoned at Tegel Prison. He looked back over the decade since Hitler had first come to power, and all the options they had had and lost, all the time wasted, when something still could have been done to repel the growing Nazi menace. It was a hard-nosed assessment of personal and social failure.

We must not forget that 95% of the approximately 80 million citizens of Germany who were Christians did not operate concentration camps or participate in mass executions of their enemies*. They mostly stood by and did not act in the face of Nazi atrocities.* This was the case in churches, no less than any other aspect of German society, and in any case, and less than one-one-hundredth of a percent of those in Germany who identified themselves as Christians ever spoke out.

*“We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds,” he wrote … “We have become cunning and learned the arts of obfuscation and equivocal speech. Experience has rendered us suspicious of human beings, and often we have failed to speak to them a true and open word. Unbearable conflicts have worn us down or even made us cynical.* ***Are we still of any use?”***

“We confess: We have been timid, evasive. We have made concessions,” Bonhoeffer admitted in his *Ethics,* written during the conspiracy as a model for the church after the war. “We have denied to the outcast and to the despised the compassion which we owe them. We have been silent when we should have cried out. We have failed to speak the right word in the right way and at the right time. We have stood by while violence and wrong were being committed by people who claimed to be followers of Jesus.”

In his book, Discipleship, an account of his teachings at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer has written about the moment when someone listens and hears the call of Christ to follow him, and takes the first step to be a disciple. “When Christ calls us, how long are we allowed to enjoy the **privilege** of the agony of decision, weighing this **option**, then that one?”

**“Privilege,”** a wise friend has often reminded me, **“is having options.”** All his life up to his imprisonment and ultimate death, Bonhoeffer himself had options. Pianist or theologian? Nazi sympathizer or resister? But what if the teachings of Jesus aren’t a smorgasbord of options, a menu of this or that? What if faithfulness is a decision made by our whole selves, affecting everything, as we turn ourselves completely over to God?. “When, exactly, are we supposed to start loving our neighbors, and our enemies, no matter what, as Christ loves us?” Or do we think we can just pick and choose, bound to no responsibilities? As Bonhoeffer put it, **“do we really think we’re God’s favorite children?”**

All the themes of Bonhoeffer’s earlier writings come back to haunt him in prison – discipleship, the church, God’s love for the world, our love for our neighbors, our love for our enemies. **None of these according to Bonhoeffer were options presented to us by Jesus, but rather consequences of faith taking form in a broken and needy world.** If we don’t understand this, Bonhoeffer asked, **are we still of any use?**

“If love,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “was mainly about loving our sisters and brothers, who we really want to love, if we could just figure out how to do it, we might misunderstand just what Jesus meant. **But if “love of even our enemies” is part of what defines us as a Christian at all, rather being just an option for the saintly, that changes everything!** What if “Christian love draws no distinction between one enemy and another, except that the more bitter our enemy’s hatred, the greater our enemy’s need for love.”

Likewise, what if the church isn’t the gathering of the righteous, but “Christ existing as community,” so that we can live not for ourselves, but in self-giving love of the other, as Christ loves us?