

Feast of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Proverbs 3: 1-7
April 20, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA 95476

A Different Kind of Friendship:

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

I still remember the first time I encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the saint whose life we celebrate today. I was fourteen years old. It was a Wednesday night during Lent. There was a movie screen set up in the church basement. Kids and adults were crammed together to watch a film about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I remember thinking why would I want to watch a movie about a German minister. What does **he** have to do with me? What does he have to **say** to me? Why are **“they”** doing **this** to me?

Then the film rolled. I was hooked from the get-go. A young pastor, theologian and teacher, fresh out of school, filled with promise, facing a future full of possibilities lands a plumb job—pastor of a German congregation in London. Then, just as he is settling into a comfortable life, the Nazis seize power in Germany. The young pastor is faced with a question that confronts him the rest of his life: How does one live in times like these? What a question for a fourteen-year-old to ponder. All that was in me wanted him to stay safe in London.

But he returned to Germany where he witnessed both the escalating persecution of the Jews and the silence of the church establishment. His question returned—how does one live in times like these? For Bonhoeffer the answer was clear—one lives in fidelity to the Gospel of Christ, a faithful discipleship that led him again and again to challenge the powers that stood in the way of the Gospel. First he lost his teaching job. Then the underground seminary he founded was closed. A reprieve came. Bonhoeffer got an appointment to Union Seminary in New York. Free from Nazi Germany. Safe—or so I thought. But Bonhoeffer couldn't let go of the question, nor could he forget the people he left behind. Three weeks after he landed in New York, he was on a boat back to Germany, to the Holocaust, and to a world at war. How does one live in times like these?

That's the question the author of the book of Proverbs was wrestling with, that's the question the psalmist struggles with, that's the question that stands behind Jesus' words, parables and ministry, and that's the question you and I face time and again in our lives as individuals and as a community. How shall we live in times like these?

How shall we live in the times in which we find ourselves—times marked by constant change, times of diminishing resources, times when folks throughout the world go to sleep hungry day after day?

How shall we live in times like these—times of juggling family, friends and work; times when there doesn't seem to be enough time even to catch your breath, times when many of our fellow citizens have to work two jobs just to pay the bills?

How shall we live, living as we do, in a time of genocide in Sudan and war in many parts of the world?

How shall we live in times when even the air we breathe and the earth beneath our feet are threatened?

How shall we live in times like these?

This is a question scripture returns to time and again. The answer is always the same. “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the commandment we are to bind around our neck; this is the commandment we are to write on our heart.

The answer scripture gives to the question “How shall we live in times like these” is to live in friendship—with God, with one another, and with all of God’s creation.

Not an exclusive closely held kind of friendship.

Not a friendship based on shared interests or experiences.

A different kind of friendship. A connected friendship—one that recognizes our fundamental connectedness with one another and with all creation and thus reaches across barriers that divide.

An Easter kind of friendship--one that practices resurrection of people, communities and the earth itself; one that sees and seizes possibilities for new life; one that brings out new life in others. Perhaps you’ve experienced such a friendship; perhaps you’ve been such a friend to others. Perhaps you know the power and the grace of Easter friendship.

This kind of friendship isn’t easy. It doesn’t come naturally to us. It’s something we grow into. It’s really grace at work.

This is the kind of friendship Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to live in the last years of his short life. At first for him, and I imagine for many of us as well, friendship was a matter of shared interests and common passions. You are like me; therefore, we are friends. Over time Bonhoeffer came to know another way of friendship—one based not on similarity but on complementarity. You are different from me and you add to me; therefore, we are friends. At the end of his life, when he found himself sharing a Nazi prison with all kinds of people from all sorts of places, Bonhoeffer discovered a different mode of friendship—one grounded simply in shared humanity. You are; therefore, we are friends. This was a friendship he characterized as “bearing with others.” A friendship of “active helpfulness.” A friendship of walking side-by-side. A friendship that led to death at the hands of the Nazis. An Easter kind of friendship.

We live in a time, you and I, of competing demands and shifting sands. We live in a time of deep human need. We live in a time when even the air we breathe is threatened.

How shall we live in times like these?

Let us live a life of Easter friendship—a friendship familiar with suffering and pain, a friendship actively engaged in bringing new life to those in deepest need. Let us be Easter friends, you and I—planting seeds of new life in one another and in the world around us. Amen