

The Beatitudes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Emily Feld, Rosemount, MN

In June 2009, I participated in the Augsburg College Youth Theology Institute in Minneapolis. We were a total of seventeen high school students studying the life and work of Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. One of the things that caught my attention while learning about Bonhoeffer was the German Lutheran Church's view on the Beatitudes during World War II. People have always been telling me that those verses in Matthew, the "Blesseds", are (or should be) a blueprint for our faith lives; that it was Jesus telling us what needs fixing in the world and in our hearts. However, I found out that it was not always so.

Back in the 1900s when Bonhoeffer was a kid, it was the accepted belief among most Lutherans in Germany that there were two "kingdoms", or "spheres". Martin Luther, founder of the Lutheran church, believed that there was the earthly, human kingdom, and the spiritual, heavenly kingdom. In her book *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians*, Lori Brandt Hale says, "Luther was attempting to articulate the relationship not only between church and state but between law and gospel, and he envisioned those relationships as dialectical in nature [page 63]." Apparently, he didn't mean for this separation of kingdoms to be a reason for allowing injustice to grow, but that was how the German Lutheran church of the time understood it. They looked at their world, shrugged their shoulders, and focused on the heavenly kingdom instead. When Hitler took power in 1933, to persuade people to cooperate with his genocide against the Jews, he would in fiery speeches, essentially tell them that it was God's will to kill them. Hitler also told them that God had given him the right to do so. The Jews, kind of like Jesus Christ?

Lutherans, like many other religious institutions, were silent against this abuse of power and the Scriptures. Everybody was afraid of persecution as Hitler took hold, even though in the Beatitudes we are told "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:10) The German Lutheran church at the time would read the Beatitudes and essentially think, "It's hard to make peace, care for the poor in spirit, and stand up for people when you're persecuted." So they didn't even think to *try* and do these things. They basically thought it was all to show how sinful we humans are!

In 1930, Bonhoeffer, now in his 20s, traveled from Germany to New York. He would then begin his studies at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan. While there, he met people like professor and social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr. Professor Niebuhr was known to say that we should preach with the bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Another man Bonhoeffer met was fellow student Jean Lasserre. Lasserre was a deeply committed pacifist, and challenged Bonhoeffer when he told him his thoughts on the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount holds the Beatitudes, among other notable verses. Lasserre thought that this sermon (or collection of sermons) should be regarded as instructions, not some happy thing to be realized in heaven. What these two men were saying is that they believed Luther's two kingdoms are completely related to each other. This wasn't a totally foreign concept to Bonhoeffer, though he was raised with the two kingdoms idea. But it was different enough for him to be wary of it. He didn't really want to embrace it at first.

His friendship with student Frank Fisher, a black American, helped him to see the injustices inflicted on the African American people in those times. Through this friendship, he probably learned how to empathize more and learn from people who are oppressed, which would help him in his later work against the Third Reich back in Germany. During this year Bonhoeffer seemed to realize how the Sermon on the Mount, and more specifically the Beatitudes, could be applied to real life. Reading the Beatitudes, he didn't think it was an unattainable goal, to be a righteous person or a peacemaker or a merciful person. He thought that we should at least *try* to obey these instructions from Jesus in order to be true disciples. Indeed, he said "only believers obey" and "only the obedient believe." (Hale 63)

A few years later back in Germany, a now Pastor Bonhoeffer was an outspoken critic of the Nazi regime, and he worked with others that did the same. Up until 1938, he thought of himself as a pacifist, but as things in Germany got worse, he realized the only way to end the bloodshed would be by paradoxically killing Hitler. The Fuhrer had killed millions and intimidated everyone else. To paraphrase Pastor John Matthews, who is a pastor at Grace Lutheran in Apple Valley, MN and Bonhoeffer scholar, when the government-- part of the earthly/secular kingdom-- wasn't acting like a real government and killing innocents instead of protecting them, Bonhoeffer believed the church should have a role in confronting the un-government; one kingdom meeting the other.

Bonhoeffer believed that the Beatitudes were a call to follow Jesus, to care for these poor in spirit, to identify with the people "thirsting for righteousness," to be merciful, striving for peace—because that is what Jesus did. In his case, all of this applied to Bonhoeffer's work to overcome Hitler. He spoke out to bring peace and religious freedom, he was persecuted and jailed, he suffered alongside the Jews so as to help them, all in the name of God. You could say that the Beatitudes encompass some of the philosophies of Bonhoeffer. Everything he did to promote justice was a sign of his "Christ existing in community" idea, that what we do in our world can be a sign of Jesus' presence in our lives. And Jesus wanted us to live in community. Bonhoeffer also place-shared with people in need, those who were oppressed (the blessed people, according to the Beatitudes) and he empathized and learned from them. Bonhoeffer called that vicarious representative action, or in German *Stellvertretung*.

There are many people today who view the Beatitudes as a serious call to action, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer did over fifty years ago. For example, one such group call themselves the Red-Letter Christians. They are a group of Evangelical Christians who are trying to bring more focus to issues that Jesus directly talked about—like poverty, peace and justice—into American politics. They believe that both the Religious Right and Liberals spend too much time bickering about abortion and gay marriage, and that many Evangelicals have lost sight of what Jesus' most important teachings: loving your neighbor, making peace, striving for justice and good in the world. Red-Letter Christians frequently refer to the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes to promote their cause. Bonhoeffer seemed to acknowledge the need for a separation of church and state to a certain extent, but during WWII there were many problems in Germany that could have been solved or brought to more people's attention if the faith community had made it a more critical priority to do just that. Indeed, many social justice problems today could be solved as well.

The Beatitudes were a very influential part of Bonhoeffer discovering his own theology. He understood that the Beatitudes—Jesus’ own words—should be taken seriously by all Christians as a call to action, as a blueprint for our faith.

Worked Cited

Brandt Hale, Lori. Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians. Westminster John Knox Press

Matthew 5:3-11 New Revised Standard Version Zondervan. 1989

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. The Cost of Discipleship SCM Press Ltd. 1959

Pastor John Matthews, personal interview. Grace Lutheran Church in Apple Valley, MN