

THE MORAL DILEMMA OF LOVE

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Reading: Mark 12: 28-31 (The Five Gospels)

And one of the scholars approached when he heard them arguing, and because he saw how skillfully Jesus answered them, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important.”

Jesus answered him: “The first is, ‘Hear Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord, and you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul (and all your mind) and with all your energy.’ The second is this: “You are to love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

There emerged in the early 1930’s a young Lutheran pastor and theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was both a scholar and a man of deep piety. He was also involved with the Christian ecumenical movement throughout Europe. Bonhoeffer believed that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount compelled all Christians to nonviolence. His book, *Cost of Discipleship*, published in 1937, argued that nonviolence was a Christian imperative. Bonhoeffer delivered a sermon in Fano, Denmark, in September, 1934. He declared,

“The brothers and sisters in Christ obey his word; they do not doubt or question, but keep his commandment of peace. They are not ashamed, in defiance of the world, even to speak of eternal peace. They cannot take up arms against Christ himself – yet this is what they do if they take up arms against one another.”¹

Adolph Hitler was already on his rise to power and the National Socialist movement co-opted the Christian Church throughout Germany. Bonhoeffer realized that Hitler was evil and he began to struggle with how a man of conscience deals with such tyranny.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the People of the World,” as quoted in *Discipleship*, translated from the German Edition and edited by Martin Kuske and Ilse Todt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 15.

He participated in the “Confessing Church” movement that wrote the *Barmen Declaration*. The *Barmen Declaration* insisted that the church was totally under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and should ever be subjugated to the state. Bonhoeffer organized an underground seminary that offered an alternative theological education to that of the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche affiliate with the Third Reich. It was shut down by the Gestapo. His writings were banned and he was prohibited from public broadcast. Because he was a pastor without a congregation he became increasingly eligible for the draft. Bonhoeffer could not in good conscience enter military service that was under the leadership of a despot.

Eventually he managed to land a position in the foreign intelligence service with the influence of his brother-in-law Hans Dohnanyi. Dohnanyi and other leaders in foreign intelligence were secretly trying to overthrow Hitler and secure a peace agreement with the Western allies. In time, these men, along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, became part of the plot to assassinate Hitler. After that plot failed all of them were executed.

So how is it that an avowed Christian pacifist discovers the moral fortitude to resist Hitler and be a part of the movement to have him killed? He resisted in many ways, including the sharing of intelligence, harboring Jews and secreting them out of Germany and harm’s way. Why did he finally join the military officer’s plot to kill Hitler? Is it not a contradiction to insist on radical obedience to the commands of Christ only in the end to capitulate to the ways and violence of the world? Is he a hypocrite?

I raise this question and the example of Pastor Bonhoeffer because I know that many who hear this message struggle with a similar dilemma. How do we follow the Way of the Cross while we engage in business, politics, and the general commerce of 21st century American life? Unfortunately it is not as simple as asking, "What would Jesus do?" That's a fine question if you are five-years-old trying to decide whether or not to share your cookies. It is an absurd question if you are trying to make a business decision and required to consider environmental impact, job security and benefits, and profit margins for investors.

The question is so difficult that we are tempted to avoid it altogether. We could create a congregation that never raises the social dimension of the Christian faith. If we have a minister who does that we will let him or her go. A variation on that theme is to find a church where Christianity is strictly a personal matter and the only question is whether you accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Such decisions so trivialize the gospel that it becomes irrelevant to every sector of society, including our own private business and personal faith. That kind of faith will get you in trouble. Consider the story about two friends.

They met one day after many years. One attended college and then earned his MBS. He was very successful. The other had not attended college and never had much ambition but somehow became very wealthy. The ambitious one asked him, "How have you become so successful?"

"Well, one day I closed my eyes, opened the Bible at random, and dropped my finger on a word and it was oil. So, I invested in oil, and boy, did the oil wells gush. Then another day I dropped my finger on another word and it was gold. So, I invested in gold and those mines really produced. Now, I'm as rich as Bill Gates."

The successful friend was so impressed that he rushed to his hotel and grabbed a

Gideon Bible. He closed his eyes, flipped it open, and dropped his finger on a page. He opened his eyes and his finger rested on the words, "Chapter Eleven."²

I have also learned that it is generally counterproductive for ministers and congregations to roll out a series of proclamations and resolutions on any and every social ill. Too often these are not thought through and take a narrow moral point of view, whether conservative or liberal. At the same time I have watched conservative evangelists crawl into bed with this or that candidate or party and aspire to control complicated moral choices for the nation. There are churches and their ministers who have decided to defy the rules of the Internal Revenue Service and endorse political candidates from the pulpit. There is actually a movement among these churches to challenge this IRS rule. "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" was observed this past September. One hundred clergy across the country participated, sending to the IRS copies of their sermons that endorsed political candidates.

I think that is wrong and I do not imagine there is anyone in this room who would favor such a practice in this pulpit. But neither do I think that the pulpit should remain silent on social issues, or policy, or legislation. By that I do not mean that the minister should dictate policy. When we do that we always come up short and the folly of our presumptions is always revealed. Consider the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "The church is not the master of the state, nor the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state."

I believe that one of the functions of the church is to be the conscience of church and society. I do not mean that the preacher prescribes legislation, or commands policy, or condemns others who have a different point of view.

² Adapted, <http://www.makeitclearnow.org/re humor.org>, downloaded 11/6/2010.

Conscience does not mean having the right answers. Conscience means that we grapple with issues and choices. We weigh the consequences. We consider the impact of decisions on people and the natural world. Christian conscience means that we constantly advocate the common good. There is no decision we will ever make that does not have social ramifications. There is nothing that we do that does not affect the community. Christian conscience always asks how it will affect the community. It wants to know how a decision, or policy, or legislation will improve or deteriorate the lives of women, men, and children.

Do you see that is not pontification? Do you see that is a disciplined and studied process that requires research and conversation? Do you see the necessity of truth, reason, and civility in such a process? Do you see that if the church is going to be the conscience of the state it must do its homework, engage every voice that has a stake in the issue, and think through the realities of finances, application, or enforcement? And can we see that even with all of this work every decision is limited, or marred, and may even carry within it the seeds of its own destruction? That reality alone requires humility of the church as we seek to engage the issues that create or destroy communities.

The truth is that every decision we make also reflects the needs of our selves and families. I do not mean that in a judgmental way. It is the nature of every human being to enter every decision with an element of self-service, or self-preservation, or self-interest. Conscience requires us to be clear about the needs of our selves that every decision represents. “What’s in it for me,” is not simply “selfish” question. It is a profoundly moral question and conscience requires that we ask it.

Conscience also requires that to the extent that we can see beyond the needs of our families, our communities, and ourselves we recognize that even our highest motives cannot guarantee that the needs of every person can be met. There will always be a minority who will not benefit and may even be hurt by our choices.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

“The realm of justice is also a realm of tragic choices, which are seldom envisaged in a type of idealism in which all choices are regarded as simple. Sometimes we must prefer a larger good to a smaller one, without the hope that the smaller one will be preserved in the larger one. Sometimes we must risk a terrible evil (such as an atomic war) in the hope of avoiding an imminent peril (such as subjugation to tyranny). Subsequent events may prove the risk to have been futile and the choice to have been wrong.”³

That is the challenge and risk of Christian conscience in the 21st Century.

The words of Jesus, “Love the lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and love your neighbors as yourself” could easily be declared the bottom line of Christian faith. It all boils down to that. But love immediately throws us on the horns of moral dilemmas. How do we love our neighbors by the decisions we make in our fields, shops, businesses, homes, and capitals? We can sing Henry W. Baker’s wonderful hymn, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.” But the feet of love must finally touch the earth if it is to have any real meaning. Love must walk the harrowed fields, wind the paths of mountains and valleys, and tromp the country roads. Love must walk the city streets, ride the commuter’s rail, and hail a taxi to where people live and work and worship. Isn’t the test of true religion social relevance?

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem,” *Love and Justice* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957), p. 29.

This is precisely the choice the Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced from the early 1930's until 1945. As he faced the possibility of being drafted into Hitler's army he determined that he could not serve a man so vile. Bonhoeffer could have declared himself a conscientious objector and would have been subjected to immediate arrest. After the war broke out he could have been executed for such a decision.⁴ He decided that he must resist and then overthrow Adolph Hitler. This decision was based on his conclusion that God is active in history and that there is a relationship between human beings and the actions of God. It is the work of Christian conscience in the realities of human life together. In an essay entitled "After Ten Years," Bonhoeffer wrote:

"I believe that God can and will let good come out of everything, even the greatest evil. For that to happen, God needs human beings who let everything work out for the best. I believe that in every moment of distress God will give us as much strength to resist as we need."⁵

God can and will let good come out of everything and God needs human beings to be the agents of God's good.

That is the work of conscience, struggle, and our best efforts to create the common good. It is at the heart of the Christian faith, a faith that comes before politics, politicians, and political parties. Or to put it another way, regardless of your party affiliation, or profession, or ideology you are capable for wrestling the question of the common good. You are all women and men of conscience. I know that. And I know that this is hard work but I also believe that you are not afraid to do it. I know that you make moral decisions every day.

⁴ Sabine Damm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 45.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years," *Letters and Papers from Prison*, translated by Barbra and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 46

Like Bonhoeffer we may have to face difficult and evil choices. Our convictions may often shift in the realities of limited choices. We might change our minds. Let me give you a personal example. When I was in seminary I was trained in the Christian theory of a just war. It struck me as a process of conscience that offered a reasonable and moral consideration in the face of very real evil. But from 1970 until 2000 I became disenchanted with just war theory as it was practiced in the public square. It seemed to me that various presidents, politicians, and political parties would trot out the term “just war” to gain public acceptance of some new military enterprise. I had my doubts that a cabinet had actually sat down to work through the criteria of *jus ad bellum* or *jus in bello*. That is to say, doing the work of conscience that determines the right to go to war and how combatants are to act once war has been declared. But since the terror attacks of 2001, I find that I am re-examining just war theory. On the one hand I remain convinced that war is generally absurd and seldom accomplishes what it hopes to achieve. The war in Iraq is a perfect example. On the other hand I think there are times when a country must defend itself against very tangible and violent enemies. Just war theory invites a conversation about that possibility. The war in Afghanistan serves as an example here. My mind changes with the vagaries of human nature and human history. I always reserve the right to change my mind.

My point is not that I am right or wrong about these or any other issue. The point is that progressive Christians are called to conscience. My job is not to tell you what to think. My ministry is not to invoke the precious name of Jesus and hope that it will all go away. My job is to honor the hard work that conscience requires of us. My job is to engage the conversation, reveal the tradition of the faith, and wonder what it means to be a Christian in

such a world as this. I believe that you are the very people of faith that God calls to work it out for the best. Your hands are the hands that God entrusts with the common good.

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