

Easter 6B – May 17, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

I John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

“You're gonna have to serve somebody.”

This is the refrain of a 1979 song by Bob Dylan. And boy! isn't that the truth!

“You're gonna have to serve somebody.”

Whether or not we want to admit it, we're all serving somebody.

In the modern world, we answer to a number of masters – our peers, our family, and friends, the government, popular fads, our image of the “good life.” All of us are doing “what we are told” in some form or another. That is, all of us are living our lives on the basis of some external source of authority that we didn't just think up ourselves.¹

“You're gonna have to serve somebody.” So the question is: Who do you serve?

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Obedience is not something we talk about a whole lot in the Lutheran church. We have a real fear of people getting the cart before the horse where grace is concerned. We want to make absolutely certain that people understand that grace is a free gift of God, not dependent upon any action on our part. So we preach grace, grace, grace, and shy away from talking about what life in Christ is supposed to

look like. We wouldn't want anyone believing that they have to climb some ladder of righteousness in order to work their way up to God.

But obedience is just what Jesus is talking about in today's reading from John. This is Jesus' prayer for his disciples as he prepares to depart from them to walk the final steps to the cross. He prays repeatedly that as he has abided in his Father's love and kept His commandments, so his disciples would also abide in him and keep God's commandments. Jesus says he is giving us these commandments so that we may love one another.

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The topic of discussion this past Thursday evening in our *Lutheran Course* was Jesus – who he is, and what he means. That's a big enough topic for years of study and discussion, but our group of theologians somehow managed to tackle it in only about an hour... Well, maybe we just scratched the surface...

One of the things we talked about was the second article of the Apostles' Creed. We noticed that the Creed has plenty to say about Jesus' birth and death, but says absolutely *nothing* about the 33 years in between. So the question we had to tackle was: Why does the Creed say nothing about the life of Jesus? Does it only matter that he was born and died as an atoning sacrifice for our sins?

We all agreed that what is contained in the Creed is the basics of the faith. It's what we need to know in order to become a Christian. And, we say these words week after week in order to remind us what it is to be a Christian.

But we can spend a lifetime living into the fullness of what it means to be a Christian. This is where the 33 years of Jesus' life that *aren't* mentioned in the Creed are important to us. What we learn about the life and teachings of Jesus during his earthly ministry can help us to become more Christ-like. We learn what it looks like to live a life of obedience to God through the example of Jesus.

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Of course, an inspiration for the church in this matter of obedience to Christ is Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his martyrdom: On April 9th, 1945, in a cold, dank cell in Flossenburg, a little town in Southern Germany, two prison guards appeared at a cell and said, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us." From there they took him, stripped him, and hung him to death, yet another victim of Nazi atrocity.

Bonhoeffer came from a noble, educated, and well-to-do German family. He was a brilliant student, and he surprised his family by deciding to become a pastor.

I mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer to you in last week's message. He is the person who famously coined the phrase “cheap grace” in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was a brilliant teacher of ethics. In short, his concept of “cheap grace” means that any religion or ethical system which proclaims salvation but does not, in the end, ultimately rely upon the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, is, in fact, peddling “cheap grace.” In his book Bonhoeffer challenged Christians to live lives of ethical integrity because of the costliness of God's grace for us.

[Bonhoeffer's] death was [a humiliating] end for one from such noble stock. [His] last act before being hung by the Nazis, was to take a copy of Plutarch's *Lives* and write his name in it. It was the last book that he had requested for his reading. Plutarch gives eloquent account of the lives of the greatest Romans and how they heroically expended their lives. Bonhoeffer chose to expend his life as a pastor.

Bonhoeffer went to his end reading both the Bible and Plutarch. During the period of his imprisonment, he was engaged in an intensive study of the Gospel of Mark, a Gospel which is all along a passion story that culminates with prisoner Jesus being led to the cross. In a way, in his life and death, Bonhoeffer embodies the Gospel of Mark.

Of course, Bonhoeffer could have left Germany. He could have stayed at Union Seminary in New York and ended his days as an honored retired professor. But he chose to get back on a boat and head back to Germany. He said, when he got on the boat to head back to Germany, that he was filled with a great sense of peace because he was obeying what he knew God wanted him to do.

Now we could debate the ethics of what Bonhoeffer did. I hope someday we will.

Bonhoeffer was an ardent opponent of Adolph Hitler from the time Hitler was first elevated to Chancellor in 1933. He tried to warn his fellow Germans that they were slipping into a form of cult worship for their leader, being blindly obedient to someone who might very likely be misleading them. He was also very wary of the nationalistic sentiments and obedience to state authority evident in the German Lutheran church. Because of this, he became a leader in the Confessing Church movement in Germany, a sort of underground Lutheran church formed in direct opposition to the Nazi takeover of the Evangelical Church.

Bonhoeffer, upon his return to Germany from the United States in 1938, quickly became a member of the Abwehr, a German military intelligence unit

which was also the center of anti-Hitler resistance. He used his extensive ecumenical contacts abroad to try to get help for the resistance.

Bonhoeffer eventually became part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. This is where the ethical question becomes particularly sticky, where – for Bonhoeffer – the ethical rubber really hit the road. He concluded that, while it is still a sin to kill, the sin of murder may sometimes be justified in order to prevent a greater sin. He wrote: “When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, he imputes his guilt to himself and no one else. He answers for it... Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace.”²

In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer stressed the importance of obedience to Christ as the hallmark of truly Christian ethics. In his life and death, Bonhoeffer did not just think about Christian ethics; he embodied Christian ethics.

Bonhoeffer commented that in his imprisonment the Gospel of Mark spoke to him with a new vividness. When read in the context of prison, the scriptural words came alive. He said that the true meaning of the cross, as revealed in Mark's Gospel, is that God has abandoned the world. “My God, My God,” Jesus spoke from the cross, as Jesus obeyed the will of God. God has been driven out of the world on a cross.

By the way, Bonhoeffer must have read the same books as the judge who tried him, Arthur Forbeck. Forbeck had been ordered by Hitler, in the very last days of the war, to execute Bonhoeffer. Forbeck took a train toward Flossenburg, and when the train stopped some 20 kilometers from the killing camp, the judge secured a bicycle and peddled the rest of the way, so eager was he to carry out the trial and execution of Bonhoeffer in obedience to Hitler's command.

These two men were both Lutherans, both worshipped [*sic*] the same God and had read many of the same books. How did they come to such vastly different conclusions?

One answer was that each of these men was following a different “savior” and obeying a different voice, aligning their lives to a different story.³

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“You're gonna have to serve somebody.”

Who do you obey?

Amen.

[1,523 words]

¹ William Willimon, “Just Obeying Orders” in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, Inc., 2009), 34.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 244.

³ Willimon, 35.