

## **“Have You Burned Your Boat?”**

It probably brings a chill to anyone in this community to hear the question: Have you burned your boat? Many in this area have boats which they use for various purposes of recreation and work. Some like to fish; others like to ski or go tubing. Some just like to ride around in their boat.

Can you imagine, though, one day you realize that you are being called upon to have other priorities in life and you need to burn your boat so you will never go back to it? In reality, you would probably sell your boat or give it away instead of burning it, but the reality would be that you would never have your boat again. Is this something you could handle?

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses what the path of being a disciple of Jesus Christ really means. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the Christian must realize that Christian discipleship is not cheap. Grace is costly. We know it cost Jesus his life. Bonhoeffer uses the example of how the fishermen who followed Jesus had to burn their boats and leave their former lives and existence behind. Their call to follow Jesus freed them from all earthly ties and bound them to Jesus alone. They were in a new situation. To stay in their former situation and keep any of their former ties would make discipleship impossible.

This is why they had to burn their boats, not just leave them behind. There had to be no chance of returning to their former life.

When the fishermen burned their boats, they plunged into absolute insecurity in order to learn the demands and the gift of Christ. If Peter had said I accept your grace but had still remained a fisherman, Jesus would have been there to help him in time of trouble but would not have been the Lord of his life. Peter would not have become a disciple.

Bonhoeffer writes:

“Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact they positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatever,”<sup>1</sup>

Bonhoeffer was a brilliant German theologian and Lutheran pastor who was born in 1906 into a prominent middle-class family in Berlin. His father was a distinguished neurologist and psychiatrist in Berlin. Dietrich earned his doctorate in theology at age 21 and his thesis (Communion of the Saints) presented a

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 59.

significantly new way of looking at the nature of the Christian church and was praised by fellow theologian Karl Barth as a “theological miracle.”

Bonhoeffer realized his faith called upon him to speak out against the Nazi regime. Two days after Hitler was installed as Chancellor, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address in which he attacked Hitler and warned against Germany slipping into a cult of the Fuhrer. In April 1933 Bonhoeffer raised the first and only voice for church resistance to Hitler’s persecution of the Jews. He was later involved in forming the Confessing Church movement, a counter to the state church of Germany which had essentially become complicit with the Nazis. Bonhoeffer was later involved in running a seminary in defiance of the Nazi government.

In our passage for today, Jesus speaks to his disciples about his impending suffering and death which is part of God’s plan. What we learn today is the breadth of Jesus’ salvation and what that call to discipleship means. The story from John 12:20-33 is that a group of Greeks who have come to the Passover festival have requested to see Jesus. This request confirms the Pharisees’ prophecy in John 12:19 that the world is indeed going to Jesus. The prominent role of Philip and Andrew in this passage is no accident. Because Philip and Andrew were the first to receive the invitation to discipleship directly from Jesus (John 1:39, 43) (Andrew

left his boat!), their presence in vv. 21-22 establishes a connection between the call of the first Jewish disciples and the arrival of the first Gentile disciples.

The arrival of the Greeks pre-figures Jesus' glorification and pre-figures the church's future mission to the Gentiles and the inclusion of Gentiles in God's promises. Their arrival points to the fulfillment of the eschatological promise of universal salvation in John 4:42. This glimpse of the future marks the arrival of Jesus' hour.

It is through Jesus' glorification, his death and resurrection, his return to God, that God's promises for God's people are fulfilled. Jesus' hour is the decisive dividing line in history. Through Jesus' death all people will be drawn to him. Jesus' death offers reconciliation to all people, but as we learned in our study of John 3:16 one must decide to accept his offer of reconciliation with God. Jesus' death is the ultimate expression of his relationship to God and his own people. To believe is the decision to become a partner in that relationship.

The future to which the arrival of the Greeks point requires Jesus' death. Jesus uses an agricultural parable to interpret his own death and why his death is necessary. In the imagery, if a single grain of wheat remains solitary, it does not die, but there is no fruit. If though, the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it bears much fruit. A person can remain solitary, save their current life, but they

will not bear any fruit to the community. “Fruit” is Jesus’ metaphor for the life of the community of faith. Jesus uses this seed parable to show that the saving power of his death resided in the community that is gathered as a result of it. One comes to Jesus through his death.

The passage today causes us to reflect on how we live our lives. The word for life in Greek is *psyche*. This is the same word used by Jesus to describe the gift of his life. To love one’s life is the opposite of Jesus’ own actions and it places one outside of the community of faith. To not change one’s life leads to the loss of that life for eternity. On the other hand, to hate one’s life in “this world” is to declare one’s allegiance to Jesus and to receive his gift of eternal life.

It is not easy to give up one’s current life to follow Jesus. Simon Peter, whom Jesus would build his church on, went back and forth. In the Gospels, Peter was anything but a rock; he was impulsive and unstable. Jesus named him not for what he was but for what he would become. In John 13:37-38, he professes his purported willingness to give up his life for Jesus. Yet, he subsequently denied Jesus three times when Jesus was arrested (John 18:15-18, 25-27). Then, after the resurrection, he reclaims his love for Jesus and rededicates himself to Jesus’ work in John 21:15-19.

Jesus calls upon those who wanted to see him to take up their cross, be willing to follow him, and be willing to lose their life. When the gospel of John was written, taking up one's cross and losing their physical life was a literal thing. By this point in time, some had already been martyred, including some by crucifixion. Peter himself had been crucified in Rome.

What we learn about today is that discipleship is a life in which a person makes one's life a matter of commitment to the confession of Jesus as the Christ. This means Jesus is Lord over all your life. In contrast, those who try to save their lives actually forfeit their eternal lives in the kingdom of God.

So, how do we apply today's passage to our lives? We need to understand that the call to discipleship is not just giving up things. It is replacing your life with new priorities. The call to discipleship is based in faith and confidence in the future victory of Christ; it is not merely a matter of high human ideals. Jesus calls on his disciples to love as he loves and to serve as he serves.

We can best understand what Jesus is talking about if we comprehend what it means to be selfless. In my observations of almost sixty years of life, I have concluded that being selfish is what causes most of the problems between humans. When we are selfish, we love only ourselves and do not care about what happens to others. We do not recognize our obligation to the community. In my opinion, the

tendency to be selfish is made even greater in the United States with our freedoms and the resources we can accumulate.

When we follow Jesus, we have to be self-less. We die to ourselves and commit ourselves to the community. We are willing to serve others and share our resources so that much fruit will be borne.

A disciple is not only called to follow Jesus to his death but is offered the promise to follow Jesus through his death to share in his glorification. What we read in this passage today is the only time in the Gospels that God is spoken of as honoring someone who is a disciple and anticipates the mutuality of relationship among God, Jesus and believer.

Have you burned your boat? Have you put your former life behind you? I think about when I burned my boat. Sometimes I think it was when I made a personal commitment to Jesus when I was fifteen and told him I would give my life to him. But I still wonder if I really burned my boat at that time. Maybe I really didn't burn my boat until I accepted the call into pastoral ministry some ten years ago. I believe I can say I burned my boat then because I clearly gave up a legal career, my business and put my complete trust in Jesus Christ to lead me.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer showed he was willing to take up the cross. He stayed in Germany throughout World War II, even though he had been invited and could have fled to both London and the United States. Although a pacifist, he concluded that Adolph Hitler needed to be assassinated. In April 1943 he was arrested for his involvement in plans of German military intelligence to assassinate Hitler.

On April 8, 1945, while being held in the Flossenburg concentration camp, Bonhoeffer was condemned to death. He was executed by hanging at dawn by wire, stripped naked, on April 9, 1945. This was just two weeks before elements of the US 90<sup>th</sup> and 97<sup>th</sup> infantry divisions liberated the camp. The camp doctor who witnessed the execution wrote: "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer...kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years I worked as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."<sup>2</sup>

Have you burned your boat? Have you taken up your cross to follow Jesus?

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<sup>2</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for his Times: A Biography*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 927.