April 14, 2013 – Third Sunday of Easter

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Last Tuesday, April 9th was the anniversary of the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For those of you who aren't familiar with him, he was a German theology student, and later professor of theology during the rise of Nazi Germany. In 1934, in protest of the Hitler regime's establishment of a national church and church leadership made up of Nazi sympathizers, he helped to found the Confessing Church in Germany, which broke away from the national church and proclaimed it to be heretical because it was run by the state.

Bonhoeffer spent some time studying and lecturing at Union Theological Seminary in New York. It was while he was there that he decided that he couldn't be true to God, the Church, and his own discipleship if he stayed in the US and out of harm's way. In a letter to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr he wrote, "I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." He returned to Germany in 1939, on the last scheduled ship to cross the Atlantic.

He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, and moved from camp to camp for a year and a half. He ended up in Flossenburg concentration camp and was executed at dawn on April 9th, just two weeks before the camp was liberated by the US army, and less than a month before the Nazi surrender. He was 39 years old.

Bonhoeffer wrote many books during his short life. One of them, when it was first published, was called simply *Discipleship,* and later, when it was published in English after his death, it was renamed *The Cost of Discipleship.* In it he argues that as Christianity spread, the Church was becoming what he termed "secularized", and was accommodating the demands of obedience to Jesus to the requirements of society. He said that God's Grace was cheapened by becoming the common property of an increasingly "Christianized" world and, in the end, could literally be sold for monetary or political gain.

It seems appropriate that Bonhoeffer's book was renamed *The Cost of Discipleship*, because Bonhoeffer himself knew that cost, and ultimately paid the highest price to follow Jesus.

Now let's turn to Luke's account in the book of Acts of Saul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. It has been called the conversion of Paul, but really it's not a conversion at all. Paul, though his name is changed to the Greek version – Paul – from the Hebrew Saul later on in Acts, never actually stopped being a Jew. And, as someone who continually studied the Torah, he never stopped being a Pharisee, although he no longer persecuted Christians after that day.

The first time we see Saul is at the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem. It's not clear whether he was behind the execution, but he certainly approved of it. Then fast forward to our passage today, where we get Saul's full measure. He is a zealot who will stop at nothing to persecute the early Christ believers.

The text says that Saul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples. A lot of times, when we see the word breathing in a literary context, it's a poetic way of someone expressing something. But remember that Luke was a careful and clever writer. The word he uses here is *empneow,* which is translated as *inhale*, and this is the only time this word appears in the entire New Testament. Saul was literally living and breathing threat and murder. Or in other words, they were his inspiration and his reason for living.

Remember, I said Saul was a Pharisee. He thought he was doing God's work in persecuting the followers of The Way, who were flouting the Torah. To that end, he even takes his crusade outside of Jerusalem and, upon departing for Syria, asks the High Priest for letters authorizing him to drag any heretical Jews he finds back to Jerusalem in chains, where presumably they will suffer Stephen's fate. He's pretty darned ruthless and merciless.

But God, as usual, had other ideas. On the road to Damascus Saul literally sees the light. Well he sees it for a second before being blinded by it. Such is Paul's zeal for God that once he encounters Jesus personally and knows who he is, he does a complete about face and never looks back. And the rest, as they say, is history. Paul takes that considerable energy and drive and uses it to establish the Gentile Church throughout Asia Minor.

Both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Apostle Paul knew and happily paid the cost of discipleship. For them both, that cost was their comfort, safety, and ultimately even their lives. Bonhoeffer had been assured of a secure position in either New York or London, where many of his family had escaped to. Instead, in order to be true to his faith and obedient to God, he chose prison and death.

Paul was essentially homeless after he began to follow Jesus. He would travel from town to town and stay with believers, but he no longer had a home of his own and it seems he had very few friends or family. In the service of the Gospel, he was beaten and imprisoned, and finally he, too, was martyred.

So, what is the cost of discipleship for us?

Just like Paul and Bonhoeffer, for us the cost of our discipleship might be to have to turn away from the safety and security of our comfortable lives, though it's not very likely that the kind of dangers we face in our day and age are necessarily going to be physical.

More likely it will be the risk of taking an uncomfortable or unpopular stance on the side of God's justice – of being the one person in a crowd who speaks up to right a wrong. Maybe it's the danger of being laughed at or sneered at for our faith, or of losing friends or business opportunities.

The cost might be not being able to see the results of your hard work in the church. Paul wrote his most ambitious letter to the Church in Rome, but he never was able to even meet the Romans, much less to see Rome become the center of the Western Church. We might plant seeds here at Grace that none of us will see blossom, but we must still plant them with faith.

Or the cost might be just that – cost. Money. We might have to give more of our time, talent, and treasure in order to keep spreading the Gospel. All of this begs the question – are we willing to pay the price? How willing are we to put our comfort, stability, reputation, friendships, jobs, money, and security in service and obedience to God?

We probably won't know until it's asked of us, but in the meantime, we have to always be on the watch for what Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, calls cheap grace. Cheap grace is expecting God's favor without expecting to pay the price of obedience. As he puts it:

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

The good news, though, is that while being a follower of Christ is not always an easy path, especially nowadays, it is, however, a path filled with joy and peace. Brennan Manning, a Franciscan priest and author who just passed away this past week talked and wrote a lot about what it means to be a Christian. He describes it beautifully in his book, *The Furious Longing of God*:

“The gospel is absurd and the life of Jesus is meaningless unless we believe that He lived, died, and rose again with but one purpose in mind: to make brand-new creation. Not to make people with better morals but to create a community of prophets and professional lovers, men and women who would surrender to the mystery of the fire of the Spirit that burns within, who would live in ever greater fidelity to the omnipresent Word of God, who would enter into the center of it all, the very heart and mystery of Christ, into the center of the flame that consumes, purifies, and sets everything aglow with peace, joy, boldness, and extravagant, furious love. This, my friend, is what it really means to be a Christian.”

The cost of discipleship may be high, but I truly believe that living a life of obedience to God, and following Jesus, is worth any price we have to pay.