

And the way that we try is by following Christ. Following Christ is the gift we give to God in return for God's gift of grace. It's our expression of gratitude to God for this gift that we've been given. It's our acknowledgement that grace is not cheap, but costly.

And the way we that we follow Christ is through *obedience*.

Obedience, to Bonhoeffer means discerning the will of God in any given situation—and then *doing it*. It means living life as Christ would have us live it. It means doing the right thing, just because it's the right thing, even if doing the right thing is hard—

Even if doing the right thing means death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pacifist who lived during the Holocaust, one of the least peaceful times in the history of the world. He truly believed that "peace" was the proper response for a Christian in times of war; he believed that following Jesus meant enacting "peace." "Peace on Earth" wasn't just an ideal for Bonhoeffer—it was a *command*. He believed that God abhorred war, that God *forbids* war.

And so the big question for Bonhoeffer was how do you follow Christ—how do you *obey* Christ—how do you enact the peace of Christ—in a world where peace seemed all but impossible?

Bonhoeffer's answer to this question was to join the resistance efforts against Hitler. It was very dangerous work, work that seemed at times to be at odds with his pacifist leanings.

But Bonhoeffer believed that it was "out of the question" for a Christian to "keep his own hands clean and let someone else do it"—that is, stop Hitler. He felt a personal responsibility, as part of his commitment to follow Christ, to speak up for those who had no one to speak for them. He reasoned that if a madman drove a car that was out of control, the correct response wasn't just to comfort the victims the madman hit—the correct response was to take control of the car and remove the driver.

So that's what Bonhoeffer did. He followed Christ by doing what he could to take control of the car that was Nazi Germany, and to remove its driver, Adolph Hitler.

He followed Christ by helping plan an assassination attempt against Hitler's life that did not work out as planned.

As a result of that, he followed Christ into a concentration camp.

And then, ultimately, he followed Christ to the end of a hangman's noose in the courtyard of that concentration camp.

In other words, he followed Christ into death. He gave Christ his life.

For Bonhoeffer, though, there was no other choice. Because following Christ was, he knew, the *only* gift he could give to God in return for God's grace. Following Christ was his expression of gratitude for the gift of grace. Following Christ was his acknowledgment that that grace is not cheap, but costly—*very* costly.

And so he followed Christ—he *obediently* followed Christ—unto death.

We may never (God willing) have to make the kinds of choices Dietrich Bonhoeffer was forced to make.

What we *do* have to be willing to do, however, is make them. We have to be willing to follow Christ wherever Christ leads us.

The words of Martin Niemoller ring just as true today as they did sixty-some years ago:

*"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me."*

In the Gospel of Matthew, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world. And, because we're the light of the world, we are to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to God in heaven (Matthew 5:15-16).

May we never be afraid to let our lights shine in this world.

May we never be afraid to speak out
May we never be afraid to follow Christ.
Amen.

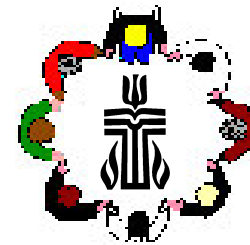
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"Costly Grace"

Sermon by
Rev. Nancy Lynch

First Sunday in Lent
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Matthew 5:14-16
Romans 5:1-5; 8:28-33

"Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others."

Matthew 5:14-16 Romans 5:1-5; 8:28-33

I don't know if you happen to follow the show *Desperate Housewives* or not, but awhile back there was an episode in which Lynette Scavo, one of the "Desperate Housewives," was running for president of her neighborhood homeowners' association.

It seems that a couple had recently moved to Wisteria Lane, bringing with them a very large and very noisy and very ugly fountain sculpture which they installed in their front yard, so that everyone could see it (and hear it). As a result, a good many neighbors wanted the fountain to be gone. So they appealed to their neighborhood homeowner association for help.

Lynette Scavo didn't especially like the sculpture ... but still. She felt very strongly that the couple should have the freedom to do whatever they wanted on their property—after all, it was their property.

Lynette was afraid the banning the ugly fountain set a very dangerous precedent—it was a slippery slope, she said, because even though *today* it was ugly fountains that had to go, *tomorrow* it could very well be something else ... something, say, like the tree house she had in her own yard for her kids.

After all, she said—once you banned *one* kind of yard art, what was next? As Lynette said in her ringing speech:

*First they came for the fountains,
And I did not speak up because I had no fountains.
Then they came for the lawn gnomes,
And I did not speak up because I had no gnomes.
Then they came for my tree house,
And there was no one left to speak out for me.*

Lynette's speech, of course, was a parody of a poem written by Martin Niemoller, a German

pastor who was imprisoned in a concentration camp during World War II because he spoke up—he spoke *out*—against Hitler. He didn't write the poem to congratulate himself for what he did, though—he wrote it because what he did wasn't *enough*. He didn't do enough; his fellow pastors didn't do enough; the Church didn't do enough. *No one* did enough to stop the evil of Nazi Germany back then when they could.

Because, he said, if they *had*—if they *had* spoken up, if they *had* allowed themselves to see where Hitler was going as he methodically unraveled the moral fabric of life as people knew it—

If they *had* spoken up, maybe—just maybe—it wouldn't have happened.

The *real* words to Niemoller's poem are inscribed on the walls of the United States National Memorial Holocaust Museum in Washington, D. C., as well as on the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston, Massachusetts, as well as on, and in, countless reprinted texts. It reads like this:

*"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I did not speak out –
because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me –
and there was no one left to speak for me."*

Niemoller's poem makes us uncomfortable—but then, I think that's the point. It's *meant* to make us uncomfortable, because it asks us to think about the ways in which we, perhaps unknowingly, perpetuate and contribute to evil.

Because, as the poem points out, we contribute to evil not only *intentionally*, when we do things to others we shouldn't do, but also *unintentionally*, when we simply stand by and do nothing when we see it. As English philosopher Edmund Burke once famously said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph [of evil] is for good men to do nothing."

But why should we care? Why should it matter if we contribute to evil, intentionally *or* unintentionally?

Because, after all, aren't we forgiven? Doesn't our faith in Jesus Christ absolve us of our guilt over the evil we commit? Isn't that what "grace" means – that God will love us, no matter what we do?

The theological concept we're talking about here is "justification," and the theological question we're exploring is this: How are we *justified*—how are we made right with—God? Is it by something that *we* do—by our "works," as the author of the book of James in the New Testament puts it? Or is this something *God* does?

Scripture passages like the ones from Romans 5 we read this morning tell us that justification is not anything *we* ourselves could do, even if we wanted to. Justification, instead, is *God's* work—God alone can make things right. God alone can make *us* right. God alone can draw us close to God, bridging the gap between us and God that we cause by doing evil.

This is in fact the basis for our understanding of "justification by grace through faith," that foundational cornerstone of Reformed theology that assures us that God loves us enough to save us from ourselves by coming to us as Jesus the Christ. Jesus makes things right. Jesus makes *us* right. Jesus bridges the gap between us and God that we cause by doing evil.

And all we have to do to avail ourselves of this wonderful salvation is believe in Jesus the Christ. All we have to do is accept this gift of grace that God has given us in Christ.

Right?

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer would affirm that this is absolutely true. Believing in Christ *does* mean that things are made right. It *does* mean that *we* are made right. It *does* mean that the gap between us and God has been bridged through Christ.

However, according to Bonhoeffer, all grace is not alike. Bonhoeffer suggests, in fact, that there are two types of grace. There's *cheap* grace,

which stops with "forgiveness of sins" and requires nothing of us ... and then there's *costly* grace, which demands a response.

Cheap grace, to Bonhoeffer, is just that—grace which is "sold on the market like the cheap wares of a bargain huckster." It's "justification of sin without the justification of the sinner." It's the "preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession."

Cheap grace, in other words, "is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without [obedience] to Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

What Bonhoeffer's saying here is that cheap grace is grace that's taken for granted by us, grace that's not appreciated, grace that's just *there*, as a given, as something to which we think we're entitled, just because we believe in Christ, just because we're *us*. Cheap grace accepts God's gift ... but refuses to reciprocate. It's grace that *takes* ... but never gives in return.

Costly grace, on the other hand,

"...calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs us our life, and it is grace because it gives us the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of God's Son ... and what has cost God much cannot be too cheap for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God."

So costly grace, to Bonhoeffer, forgives the sinner ... *but not the sin*. Sin is evil, and is therefore, by definition, unforgivable.

And because it's unforgivable, Bonhoeffer says, we have a responsibility *to not do it*. Even though we're forgiven when we *do* sin, that doesn't mean that sin is okay. And so, Bonhoeffer says, even though we can't not sin, he says, we do have an obligation to *try* to not sin.