



## *“The Ethical Consequences of Christian Discipleship”*

Ephesians 4:25-5:2; Matthew 18:15-35

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

By all accounts, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a remarkable man. The trajectory of his life makes him even more remarkable. No one would have guessed this son of privilege would become a modern martyr, that this young theologian and pastor would become a secular saint.

Bonhoeffer was born into an aristocratic and rather secular German family in 1906. Son of a prominent psychiatrist and university professor, young Dietrich earned the equivalent of two Ph.D.s by age 25. Appointed to teach at the University of Berlin, he seemed to be heading for a life of success and status in German high society.

Still quite young, Bonhoeffer became a Christian against the wishes of his family. Before long he risked everything by joining the resistance movement that opposed the Nazi regime. With everything to lose personally, he became a public voice of resistance. He joined a group of prominent Germans who attempted to overthrow the Nazis, was found out, arrested and, just days before the liberation of Buchenwald where he was a prisoner, he was executed. He was 39 years old.

Why risk it all for what then, as now, seemed a lost cause? What accounts for this young, privileged aristocrat seeing clearly the demonic character of National Socialism when so few could see it?

His answer is clear: he read the Bible and in its pages met Jesus Christ and came under the power of his teaching. As a young professor of theology, he taught a course on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and was transformed by it. A new and radical ethical framework turned his life right side up.

Bonhoeffer's brother tried to argue young Dietrich out of his faith. In a letter, Bonhoeffer replied, "Some things are worth standing up for – like peace, justice and Jesus Christ himself." In 1933, young Professor Bonhoeffer was one of very few who spoke out publicly against the first Nazi pogroms against the Jews. Against his own self-interest and the interests of his family, class and culture, he said, "No."

Bonhoeffer had discovered the secret of authentic Christianity: it is a way of life, no mere system of thought. In that way of life we belong to another.

Moreover, that way of life is fundamentally communal – it is a moral life lived in connection to other persons. The Christian "way" is learned and lived out in a radical new community of people in relationship to Jesus Christ and one another.

One of the places Bonhoeffer learned about this new way of community life is Matthew 18. The entire chapter can be titled, "Life Together," the same title Bonhoeffer gave one his most influential books.

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon 21 March 2010**

Jesus' instructions about life in the new community was prompted when some of his leading disciples came asking him to settle a long standing argument in the little community. "In your kingdom, make ME secretary of state, not him," was the way the argument was going.

Like all conflict, this argument was the consequence of prideful self-interest – the human original sin. Each thought he deserved the top spot closest to the throne. Each resented the other's similar ambition.

I've seen it firsthand. In 2000 I was in Washington, D.C. and invited to an inaugural party in honor of the election of George W. Bush as President. It was a happy and loud affair hosted by some old hands in D.C. Republican circles. They were all talking in disparaging terms about the obnoxious Texans strutting their stuff in tall hats and wide belt buckles. They were now the "in" crowd, closest to the power. It was classic self-interest, pride and ambition creating conflict. The only difference in 2010 is that it's Chicagoans who are resented by old Democratic hands in the capital.

Reinhold Niebuhr noted that self-interested pride is the original sin that disturbs all person, societies and nations.

"It is egoism which corrupts the spirits of all those who possess some excellency of knowledge or achievement that distinguishes them from the crowd. They forget their common humanity and their equal standing with all others before God."

That prideful egoism was disturbing Jesus' new community. It had the potential to destroy the movement and it disturbed Jesus. It was time to teach his disciples some basics of life in the new community he was forming.

Jesus gathered all his disciples together and placed a child in the middle of them. "If you want to understand what I'm about and what I've come to do, look at this child," he said. "Unless you become humble like this child, you will never understand the first thing about me nor will you experience the new thing I'm establishing in the world."

Notice that it's the natural humility of a child to which Jesus points. Children are dependent, not independent. Children have not yet developed pretense, a sense of self-importance or soaring ambition. They have no resume and don't know they should have one. Having achieved nothing, they are proud of nothing. No rugged individualism here: they are needy and have no problem admitting it.

That's where life in the new community begins, according to Jesus. Peter, for example, had achieved a thing or two. He owned his own fishing business and already he'd moved to the top of the pecking order in Jesus' inner circle. He was successful and proud of it.

Jesus' point is not to deny any of that. But in God's new order, such things don't count any more. Status is achieved by humility. "Let him who is greatest among you be the servant of all," Jesus taught. He showed them how. The night before he died, the Son of God and Savior of the world took a bowl and towel and washed these squabbling disciples' feet as a demonstration of the new way of life.

"Be humble like a child," he told them. And by the way, he added, "Don't ever, ever do anything to harm these little ones. They are a precious trust to be treasured, nurtured and loved." Today, I suspect Jesus would add, "And don't ever, every protect those who do harm my little ones." Such heinous crimes, including protection of such criminals, are a matter of retributive justice.

The Christian way of life begins with the conversion of our human consciousness. We come to God – and each other – with empty hands. The Christian way is grounded in the consciousness that we need God and we need each other. We are not independent, free moral agents.

Then Jesus applied his revolutionary idea to ordinary human experience. Suppose someone in the new community offends you or angers you because of some conflict of ideas or personality. And conflict will happen. It's human. The problem is that conflict too often moves in a destructive direction. We offend and get offended, annoy and get annoyed, become angry and make angry. Conflict becomes personal and, when it does, it is destructive.

So, Jesus went on, conflict resolution is necessary. When you are offended, angry, annoyed, and it begins to affect your relationships, make things right with one another. Take the initiative and reconcile. Keep short accounts. Don't let things fester. Nothing good can come of it.

Jesus doesn't say we will always agree. He certainly isn't advising we dump our resentments or criticisms on each other. He does say a community priority is positive relationships. He does say that when we do disagree, we should not lose respect for each other, dishonor each other or despise one another. This is a high priority.

It's so important that if you can't set things straight with someone, take some friends with you and try again. The issue is the relationship, not the conflict itself.

Reconciliation is so critical, Jesus adds, that if the conflict cannot be solved by you and your friends, it is a matter for the entire community. Belonging to a community of Jesus' disciples is to be accountable to that community. No free agents and autonomous Christians here!

The health of the community is so important that when someone will not be reconciled, discipline is required. Unsettled conflicts result in unhealthy communities. And we know it!

Such an accountable way of life is difficult and complicated. It requires mutual trust, open honesty and the capacity to forgive – and to forget.

Immediately Peter recognized the difficulty and asked a good question. If my brother or sister asks me to forgive them, how many times should I forgive? What are the rules and regulations of such a way of life? Peter's question reveals he's already missed the point. This way of life is deeper than rules, regulations and keeping score.

Jesus told a story to answer Peter's question.

A king had a slave who owed him a debt so large it could not be repaid in multiple lifetimes. He called the slave to account and demanded repayment. The man begged for mercy and the king, against all conventional wisdoms and expectations, forgave the debt.

The forgiven slave immediately found a man who owed him \$100 and demanded repayment. The debtor could not repay the debt so the forgiven slave threw him and his family into debtor's prison.

The other slaves got wind of the unmerciful slave's cruelty and reported him to the king. The king called the forgiven slave back and demanded to know why, when he had experienced sheer mercy, he could not find it in himself to offer mercy to others. He threw the ungrateful wretch into debtor's prison.

The point is, Jesus said, you and your church must be like the merciful king. You must forgive one another, *from the heart*.

Being accepted by God, forgiven by God out of sheer mercy, must create a new way of thinking, living and seeing. In Christ, God is teaching us how to be merciful for no good reason other than being merciful – like God is merciful.

That is why St. Paul writes those rather remarkable words in the Epistle lesson, "Be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving to each other *as God has forgiven you*. Be imitators of God."

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon 21 March 2010**

Such a transformation of the heart creates merciful communities capable of the moral power necessary to live in community and to transform the world.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, did not intend to found a worldwide organization. Rather, he was transformed by an Easter journey in which he passed starving children and poverty stricken adults, the victims of the Industrial Revolution. "I am haunted by those faces," he wrote, and he set out to do something about it. The result was the Salvation Army, one of the great charitable organizations of recent history.

In 1912, near the end of his life, Booth said that vision still compelled him to service for God. He added,

When women weep as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison in and out, in and out, I'll fight; while there yet remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight – I'll fight to the end.

Christian faith is powerfully ethical. It transforms disciples from the inside out and creates communities that change the world.

Amen.

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