

Transfigured

Mark 8:31



©Rev. Joyce Shin
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In December 1942, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sent a Christmas letter to his closest friends. It was entitled "After Ten Years." In it, Bonhoeffer tried to present some of the conclusions he had drawn ten years after Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany. He qualified what he wrote by saying that his conclusions were not systematically arranged. Intended to be neither theories nor arguments, they were simply conclusions about the business of human life reached by first-hand experience.

He went on to say that his conclusions about human affairs were nothing new, nothing that others before him hadn't concluded. Nevertheless, they were worth something to him because he had reached them by first-hand experience.

What he, from first-hand experience, wrote drew me in. It drew me in, I think, in part because he wrote so honestly, searchingly, in a confessional manner, about his struggle to find a place to stand in a country that he loved. In his letter, Bonhoeffer described the confessing Christian's situation, as he saw it, in Germany: "One may ask whether there have ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet - people to whom every available alternative seemed equally intolerable, repugnant, and futile, who looked beyond all these existing alternatives for the source of the strength" ("After Ten Years: A Reckoning Made at New Year 1943," p. 3). It is hard to know where to stand when the ground upon which people have traditionally stood has become so unreliable.

This week we have heard from high school students who have been traumatized by the mass shooting of their classmates and teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. What they have been speaking, from first-hand experience, has drawn all of us in. In their raw pain, they too do not know where to stand. They have been let down by lawmakers, by law enforcement, by their schools, by all the adults - by all of us who are adults. If you have heard them speaking out, you know that they have little to no trust in our democratic institutions. No longer able to rely on the institutions that they should have been able to trust, teenagers are taking upon themselves the responsibility of advocacy. They are walking out of schools, marching to their state capitol, getting on airplanes, giving interviews, meeting with the president, and risking attack for speaking out.

For a number of years, we have been aware of the erosion of trust that we used to place in our institutions. A recent PBS News Hour poll finds that Americans have limited confidence in public schools, courts, organized labor, and banks; even less confidence in big business, the presidency, political parties, and the media; and the least confidence in Congress. As I am sure you have heard, the only institution that Americans have overwhelming faith in is the military; 87 percent say they have a great deal of confidence in the military. It is not, however, only institutions that we are having a hard time trusting. According to some surveys, Americans are also having a hard time trusting each other (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americans-are-losing-faith-in-democracy--and-in-each-other/2016/10/14/b35234ea-90c6-11e6-9c52-0b10449e33c4_story.html?utm_term=.4fe4d3a6ecf4).

Though the erosion of trust in America today is due to very different factors than in Germany in the 1930s and '40s, since in those years under Nazi rule, institutions - everything from government to the military to the media to the universities to social clubs to churches - had become instruments of a totalitarian state, in both situations, we find individuals attempting to carry the full burden of moral responsibility. Unfortunately, as far as Bonhoeffer could see, the German people could no longer place trust even in themselves. He came to the rather somber conclusion that reasonableness itself was failing them. Fanaticism was never an option to

serve as a moral compass. Even the conscience could not be a trustworthy guide. Duty, which more and more people began to rely upon, was too easily coopted for unjust systems. Private virtue was inadequate for the public sphere, and assertions of freedom could lead to moral tragedy. Unable to rely on any of these things to find their moral bearings, Bonhoeffer asked, "Who stands fast?" And he answered it by saying: "Only the man whose final standard is not *his* reason, *his* principles, *his* conscience, *his* freedom, or *his* virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this" when he is called to obedience and in exclusive allegiance to God (5). Only that person will stand fast.

There is in this answer a deep self-distrust. Our reasons, our opinions, our principles, our conscience, our freedoms - all this we have to be ready to jettison, to sacrifice, if we are to obey God, if we are to follow Jesus.

This is, I think, the meaning of what Jesus says in his reprimand of Peter. There is a difference between setting our minds on divine things and setting our minds on human things (8:33). If we want to follow Jesus, we have to set our minds on divine things. In the passage we read this morning from the gospel of Mark, Peter, who is always the most eager, the most ready, to follow Jesus, is guilty of setting his mind on human things. Still holding onto *his* belief that Jesus is the Messiah who will lead a political victory, Peter cannot accept what Jesus has just foretold: that Jesus must suffer, be rejected, and be killed. When Peter begins to counter Jesus' foretelling, Jesus not only rebukes him; Jesus calls him Satan. In the Gospel of Mark, Satan is the ultimate deceiver, the one who tempts and tests Jesus in the wilderness, the one whom Jesus absolutely refuses to trust!

Jesus finds himself in a precarious situation, a situation in which there is no one to trust. He knows that he will be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes - representatives of religious institutions in which Jews had placed their trust. He knows that he will be put to death in Rome, by those very powerful institutions of the empire. And as much as he would like to trust those closest to him, his disciples, he knows that he cannot, for they have not yet learned to deny themselves, to distrust their reason, their beliefs, their principles, their expectations.

The deterioration of trust in the institutions and individuals we have relied upon is deeply troubling. It leaves the next generation searching for a place to stand and for a place from which to speak. We must do everything we can to build up a trusting and trustworthy society. Nevertheless, the paradoxical truth that we must teach every generation is this: that only by ultimately mistrusting our institutions, humanity, and even ourselves, can we follow Christ, who shows us how to give ourselves without reserve to God who alone is trustworthy.

I'd like to end my sermon by reading to you a passage from Bonhoeffer's Christmas letter to his friends. It speaks of this paradox of life as a Christian. He writes, "The air that we breathe is so polluted by mistrust that it almost chokes us. But where we have broken through the layer of mistrust, we have been able to discover a confidence hitherto undreamed of. . . . We now know that only such confidence, which is always a venture, though a glad and positive venture, enables us really to live and work. We know that it is most reprehensible to sow and encourage mistrust, and that our duty is rather to foster and strengthen confidence wherever we can. Trust will always be one of the greatest, rarest, and happiest blessings of our life in community, though it can emerge only on the dark background of a necessary mistrust" (11-12). Friends, there is for the church perhaps no higher and more realistic calling than to work continually to build and re-build trust in the world.

