

Pathways 3 February 8 2015
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Testimony from Bobby Sharp, littlest angel choir

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the great Christians of the 20th century.¹ He was a German churchman who watched with alarm as his fellow German Christians embraced the Nazis. The church gave up its birthrights one by one—when the government said those of Jewish blood can't be ordained the church said, sure.² When the government said to be a pastor you have to swear allegiance to Adolf Hitler the church said, sure. When the Nazis started rounding up Jews and putting them in camps the church said, sure. We should always remember friends that as we love our country our first allegiance is to God, and sometimes we have to say no. Bonhoeffer and a few friends were courageous enough to say no. He could have escaped Germany. He was living in New York, had a prestigious job offer, could have ridden out the war in safety. Again he said no. He had to share the fate of his fellow Germans. He went back. Bonhoeffer was also a pacifist, believed Jesus condemns all violence. But he was willing to break that commitment to try to help kill Hitler. He was afraid he'd go to hell for doing so, even for killing a monster. Amidst all these dramatic events, Bonhoeffer described being a Christian this way:³ "When Jesus Christ calls a person, he asks them to come and die." And he showed us what he meant. One of Hitler's last acts before his own suicide was to order Bonhoeffer's execution.

I left something out of the story. Told like that Bonhoeffer sounds like a hero. But the church has no heroes. We have saints. It's a different thing. Saints are never solo. They're always grown in tandem, 2's, 3's, dozens, hundreds. None of us can be a saint alone. But with others Jesus has a shot at making us holy. A few years ago I was at an academic conference and I looked over at the ancient man beside me and he was Eberhard Bethge. Bonhoeffer's best friend, near 90 years old. The one who wrote his 1000 page biography. One he wrote to from prison. One who wept like the world was gone when his friend was gone. There is no Bonhoeffer without Bethge. Just like there's no Jesus without John the Baptist, no church without the apostles. There's no you without me, and none of us without those who handed the faith to us. When I saw Bethge I wanted to touch him, hoping some of the holiness might be contagious. I wish I had, he's dead now, but he's not gone, the saints never are. Hear this word from the Gospel of John about how one friend shows another what true life is. And notice this—Jesus does call us to come and die, Bonhoeffer is right. He also says to follow him—to follow Jesus is true life. Hear this word.

John 1:43-51

43 Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." 49 Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

¹ <https://lifeondoverbeach.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/dietrich-bonhoeffer.jpg>

² <http://chriseller.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/D8011-1.jpg>

³ Quote on screen attributed to Bonhoeffer plz

This is the second in a series of sermons called Pathways about our new graphic identity as a church. Our new logo and our new icons are designed to tell our story visually. They remind us who we are. Without them we're just that big church behind new market. With them we are a people who worship, who connect, who serve, and who grow. Church is a verb, not a noun, not a building, but a people committed to our whole community flourishing. Today's focus is on connect. Often worship is our first entry into the church. Connecting has to follow. When someone comes to be part of us they have to find themselves enmeshed in friendships or we'll lose them. I think our church is really good at being friendly to new faces. Here's the question—do we make it easy for folks to get involved at our church? Do we extend ourselves in friendship? Do we say not just “welcome” but also “hey, come to lunch with us after church?” I often describe Boone as a friendly place where it's hard to make friends. People are kind here, but there is a mountain reserve that marks us, and that's fine. Church reminds us we also have to open ourselves out and make a chance for folks to grow in friendships with others.

⁴Point one today: we are made for connection. Human beings are who we are only in relationship to others. Tell me who someone's friends are and I'll tell you who they are. Human beings are the only creatures that can't give birth alone. We can't, the child will die with no one to help. We can't even die alone. Someone has to care for us, bury us, remember us. We are social animals. But goodness do we ever prefer to act alone. That's death. To act with others is life.

One example, just over 50 years ago now four college students bravely desegregated a restaurant in Greensboro. This was the first sit-in that ended segregation laws in public places throughout the south. Those sitting in just sat down and asked to be served. As more than one wise person said they should've just served that cup of coffee. But Woolworth's abided by the laws, and the laws said there's a section for whites, and a section for blacks. They were not served. The next day they came back with 50 friends. Thousands more sat together unserved, sometimes abused, beat up. How do you do that? The answer is friendship. These four original protesters were friends, suitmates, at North Carolina A&T. They'd tossed around this idea for months. They trusted each other. Loved each other. And could push each other to be better than they were on their own. One day one of them challenged the others. Joseph McNeil said to his three close friends, “Are you guys chicken or not?” You can only say that sort of thing to a trusted friend. And the next day McNeil and Ezell Blair and David Richmond and Franklin McClain set out and changed the world. Making a few close friends can change everything. Do you see how high the stakes are when we ask you to sign up for a community group? Join a Sunday School class? Serve on a committee? Be in the choir [praise team]? This is I think the appeal of serving in the military, why so many of you loved it, it's the friendships unlike any other, forged under fire for others' sake. I asked a marine veteran friend about the controversy over the *American Sniper* movie, and he said his unit lost more men to suicide in Fallujah than they did to battle. Don't see that in the movie. He said young men still come up asking about joining the marines. He said it's because it's the last rite of passage in our culture. The last place where men can learn to be men. He's a pastor now. He said “I tell them the same thing. Why not try the church?”

In our story Jesus meets Nathaniel for the first time. They have not laid eyes on one another. But Jesus already knows him. He created him. He's loved him since before he was born. And when he sees Nathaniel he greets him,⁵ “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” Other translations say “an Israelite in whom there is no guile.” Still a little antiquated. Try this one. “Here is an Israelite in whom there is nothing false.” What a beautiful greeting. Jesus essentially says “Here is someone beautiful, someone I love.” In Christianity we teach about original sin. Since Adam fell we're all sinners. All of us. But we're still made in the image of God. Every human being still bears the image of Christ, whether we know it or not. You would

⁴ I. We are made for others.

⁵ This bit of John 1:47 up please

think with original sin Jesus would have seen Nathaniel and said, “Here is a sinner.” Nope. He says, “Here is a beautiful person, someone I treasure.” What if we treated everyone we saw that way? We would connect with them more often wouldn’t we? Think of how we size people up. This one is poor. That one might be dangerous. That one thinks they’re above me. We do all this in nanoseconds. Jesus says to all, “look—a reflection of the living God.” Desmond Tutu, great archbishop of South Africa. Says that any time we see another person we should bow. God’s face shines in that one. I thought of Tutu when I saw a man at a gas station on Christmas Eve. My family was driving to Texas, my kids were in the van as I paid for gas, and this young man crazed out of his mind on drugs tried to sell to me. Guess I stopped on the wrong side of the tracks. The store owner brushed him off. What inspires someone to sell on Christmas morning to a stranger? What would it mean to bow to him? To the owner? For them to to me? One day we will, as we all bow to Christ, whether we like it or not.

So many people in our world are so alone. I told you a few weeks ago of a poll that said 94% of people report having no close friends. One way to put this is they have no 2 am friends—folks they can call in the middle of the night if they really need to talk. We need that. Having that is what it means to be human. How many people spend their free time in a tunnel, watching cable, ignoring their family, drinking themselves into a stupor? We weren’t made for that. We were made for relationship. Friendship. It was the church that taught me this. I never saw friendship modeled until the Baptists showed me Jesus. Then they showed me how to be a friend. Ask how someone’s doing. Remember stuff. Ask how their struggle with this or that is going. Pray for them. Send them notes. I’d never seen this before. I liked it. It’s what it means to be church. To connect. To make another part of our life and vice-versa. CS Lewis said friendship is born in the moment when we say,⁶ “Wait, you too? I thought I was the only one?”

There is a preacher story of a committee for ordination where an old saint would save the best question for last. She’d point out the window and ask the candidate for ordination, “See that stranger walking down the street? Describe that person theologically.” Some would say “Why that’s a sinner alienated from God.” Others would say “That’s a creature God made who bears God’s image.” Both are true. But the asker would say those who answered the second way made the better ministers. So too of us all as people. We do well to see all people everywhere as image bearers for a king. Folks we should bow to. Folks who getting to know will enrich our lives beyond measure.

Point two,⁷ being from nowhere. Nathaniel asks Philip this famous question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I was with some of you in Nazareth earlier this year and I’m tempted to ask this question again. It’s a dirty place, too many tourists (I mean all the other tourists). In Jesus’ day it was nowhere. Maybe 150 people. Really conservative. It’s the kind of small town everybody comes from if you go back far enough. Ask a student at App where they’re from and they’ll say Raleigh, Winston, Charlotte. But ask where their parents are from and you’ll get some little place you’ve never heard of. Dismal Swamp. Possum Trot. Frog Hollow. Go back far enough and we’re all from a Nazareth. Can anything good come from that place?

Lots of people from small towns grow up embarrassed by where they’re from. It’s nowhere you’ve heard of they’ll say. A campus minister friend of mine says this in response, don’t be embarrassed by your hometown. It’s a place. It made you. Be proud of it. Just because someone’s from a place with lots of concrete doesn’t make them sophisticated. He might have just said “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” The answer is yes. Jesus’ last name is Jesus of Nazareth. The best thing God has ever done. The alpha and omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end, God almighty in one Jew. God says to all small towns everywhere

⁶ Quote on screen attributed to Lewis please.

⁷ II. Being from nowhere

you matter: Zionville, Vilas, Green Valley. There's a community not far from here that was one of the last to get electricity, appropriately called Dark Hollow. Jesus says hey, I could've been born there. Duke's most famous author was a man named Reynolds Price. He was from Macon, NC. Ever heard of Macon? Neither have I. Bill Friday was UNC system president for 30 years. He was from Dallas North Carolina. Heard of Dallas? Maybe cause it has an exit on 85. When these two died a commentator said small towns are "people estuaries." Places that grow things. Leaders disproportionately come from small towns. Why? Everybody knows you. Knows your business. Knows your strengths and weaknesses. You can't hide in small towns. You have to learn how to relate to different kinds of people. Sort of like Boone. Sort of like our church. We're a people estuary. We grow souls. Small towns are a headache, Lord knows. But how do they grow souls in the suburbs? Suburbs are not-places really. Designed to be indistinguishable, the same stores, roads, signs. Small towns are at least places.

It's not that everything that happens in small towns is good. They can be places of crushing loneliness and small-mindedness and hate. So can every other place on earth. All God has is sinners to work with. This is why God makes us to connect. So we can have our hard edges rubbed off, learn how to forgive. I did something awful last week to one of ours, it was a mistake but it hurt him. I felt like the worst person in the world. I was honestly. And as I told others about it you hugged me, listened, and gently said go to him, ask forgiveness. I did, and you offered it. A small, fragile gesture. And the only way to be human. I'll mess up again. So will you. Jesus might make a church out of us yet.

But it's not just about towns is it? It's about all of us. We look in the mirror and think we're not quite good enough. How can something good come from my family? From a person with my waistline? From this salary? Think of all the lies with which we evaluate ourselves. Not pretty enough. Not accomplished enough. Not good enough. God says "there's someone I treasure." "There's a town God gets born in." And we say, nah, he must mean someone else. And Jesus looks right at us, at us, and says, no, I mean you. You're just like I dreamed. Now, come, follow me. Come and die. And live.

⁸Point three, the church is God's connection. Look what happens here between Jesus, Philip, and Nathaniel. Church breaks out among strangers. Jesus says to Philip "follow me," and he does. He gets his friend Nathaniel. Nathaniel can't believe that Jesus knew he was under a fig tree before they even met. He overreacts.⁹ "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Whoah there, everybody calm down. Or as Jesus says,¹⁰ "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things." Our *Last Supper* play we've done every year for a quarter century has Nathaniel say this is because mothers set their babies in the shade of fig trees to work the fields. Jesus is saying he knew Nathaniel as an infant. Bit of poetic license—as a preacher I approve. I wonder whether more is being said. Humanity fell because of a fruit tree. The bible never says it's an apple, it leaves the fruit unnamed. Apples are common to Europe but rare in the Middle East, a better guess is it was a fig. The fig tree has then been a sign of failure. Jesus remakes it a sign of hope. Nathaniel under a fig tree sees his savior and rejoices. This is how the church is different than any other club or group or organization. They're all good, we need more of them. But the church exists because God is renewing all creation. Starting with us. And will one day in full. That's a lot from a comment about a fig! But God has always done more with less promising material.

A friend of mine was on a plane once. We religious leaders know not to say what we do on planes, because strangers regale us with all their problems with religion. I'm saying I'm a spy next time. Anyway he said he was a minister and the women with him gave him the business about what hypocrites Christians are.

⁸ III. The church is God's connection

⁹ This bit of Jn 1:49 up plz

¹⁰ This bit of Jn 1:50 up plz

He might have said, tell me a group of human beings who aren't hypocrites? And anyway, why are you so mad at us for being hypocrites except that you want there to be a people who are like Jesus? Your anger is a sign it's all true. Anyway, he was nicer than I would have been, he said all I know is there are people whose lives have been transformed, who are slowly rehabilitating out of sin and selfishness and into grace, who are transforming their communities into places of greater grace and hope. She said, "I want the names of these people." The name I'd like to give them is that of Boone Methodist. We pursue Jesus by connecting. And the world rejoices. Amen.