

Sermon

5/15/22

Get Thee Back to Hymnody!

The Hymnal as Devotional

Pastor Dan

Dear Eberhard,

All I want to do today is to send you a short greeting. I expect you are often with us here in your thoughts and are always glad of any sign of life, even if the theological conversation stops for a moment. These theological thoughts are, in fact, always occupying my mind; but there are times when I am just content to live the life of faith without worrying about its problems. At those times I simply take pleasure in the day's readings [from Scripture] – in particular those of yesterday and today; and I'm always glad to go back to Paul Gerhardt's beautiful hymns.

* * *

These words come to us from a Nazi prison cell in July of 1944. They were written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his closest friend a day after the failure of the Valkyrie Plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The Nazis soon discovered his involvement in the plot, and in less than a year they would execute him just weeks before American forces would liberate the camp where Bonhoeffer had been imprisoned.

It's a story of deep tragedy but also a triumph, not of the will but of *faith*. According to one eyewitness, a fellow-prisoner, Bonhoeffer died after saying these words: "This is the end – for me, the beginning of life."

Most of us at Queen Anne Lutheran have heard of Bonhoeffer. He was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who defied the Nazi regime almost from the beginning. He wrote several modern Christian classics, including *The Cost of Discipleship*, taught at an underground seminary for the Confessing Church, which also opposed the Nazis, and he participated in Operation 7 – a successful attempt to smuggle not seven but ultimately fourteen Jews into Switzerland using false papers in August and September of 1942.

What we may *not* know is the personal dimension of Bonhoeffer's faith, how he struggles with doubt, how he corresponded with Mahatma Gandhi, and how he labored over the agonizing choice to relinquish his Christian passivism by taking part in assassination attempt on Hitler's life.

"There is," he wrote, "no way out without guilt." Either he involves himself in the potential murder of another human being, or he stands by complicit for doing nothing as his Jewish brethren, including a close relative by marriage, were slaughtered.

A Sung Source of Inspiration

What you *also* may not know about Bonhoeffer is how much the hymns of our Lutheran heritage comforted him, especially in the last year or so of his life. As you heard or read a moment ago, he especially liked “the beautiful hymns” of Paul Gerhardt.

Gerhardt’s focus was on salvation by grace, an emphasis perfectly in keeping with his identity as a Lutheran pastor and theologian. By the end of his life in 1676, he had written 123 hymns, nine of which appear in the red hymnal we use for worship.

Of course, for Bonhoeffer Gerhardt’s hymns inspire more than mere artistic appreciation. They also provide immense *reassurance and strength* in the midst of circumstances most of us could probably never imagine. “Every hour or so since yesterday,” Bonhoeffer writes in 1943, “I’ve been repeating to my own comfort Paul Gerhardt’s [Pentecost] hymn with the lovely lines ‘Thou art a Spirit of joy’ and ‘Grant us joyfulness and strength,’ and besides that, the words ‘If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small’ (Prov. 24), and ‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control (II Tim. 1)” (Bethge, ed., *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 53).

Notice Bonhoeffer’s reaction. Not only can passages from Scripture, which he cites at the conclusion of this excerpt, convey the gospel or what Martin Luther calls the “encouraging news” of God’s radical grace, mercy, and empowerment. The hymnody of our tradition does that too! Yet, how often do we search the height and depth of our hymns for comfort? How often do we mine them for the sake of reassurance? How frequently do we ignore their lyrics when we sing them?

Think about it. Our minds wander. That may happen occasionally during the sermon, but it also happens when we sing. Perhaps the melody moves us to such an extent that we ignore or overlook the text. On the other hand, maybe the hymns have become so familiar to us that, as with repeating every Sunday the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostles’ Creed, we no longer meditate on the words. Or maybe, for those of who identify as musically challenged, we spend so much time trying to figure out the melody that the language escapes us!

But words matter! Think about how *affirming* it can be to hear “I love you,” or how *devastating* it can be to hear “You disgust me” or “I hate you.” Bonhoeffer knew that. The question is, do we?

Reflecting on our Hymns

In honor of Virginia Stamey's late mother Janice, who served for years as the organist at Trinity Lutheran in Lynnwood and whose legacy we celebrate in a hymn festival later this afternoon, let me offer a few examples of the good news we find in today's hymns.

Notice first "Day of Delight and Beauty Unbounded," our Gathering Hymn for the 10:30 service. "Day of delight and beauty unbounded," it says, "tell the good news, the gospel spread." Why should we? Because in the resurrection of Christ, the "sun from darkness appears" and "mourning [has] turned into dancing." Now we have a reason to hope!

Look around you, the hymn tells us. The seed, as evident everywhere this time of year except Seattle, "from barren earth [has begun] greening." If Scripture does not comfort you, in other words, look to nature. "Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in books alone," writes Martin Luther, "but in every leaf of springtime!" In other words, spring confirms what Scripture teaches: death will not have the last word. Love (and life) wins.

Our Hymn of the Day likewise elicits hope and offers "encouraging news," if only we truly hear its words. "Christ dwells in our midst," it says, "where charity and love prevail." Listen to the affirmation. In our fellowship, when we greet the stranger, offer a kind word, share in one another's pain and joy, Christ lives among us! Perhaps you remember the same promise in Scripture: "No one has ever seen God; [yet] if we love one another, God [or Christ] lives in us, and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12).

Consider, finally, our Sending Hymn. "Christ to the people," it proclaims, Christ to us, "gift of the future now flowing in time." What gift? "Jesus is risen," as we sing in the refrain, "and we shall arise [too]." There we have it: the heart of the gospel. "Death has been swallowed up in victory," shouts Paul after meditating on the mystery and magnitude of Christ as the first fruits of God's new creation. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:54b-55).

Christ is risen, in short, and we shall be too!

The Hymnal as Devotional

Dear friends in Christ, some of you read the Bible for devotional purposes, for words of "encouraging news." You are right to do that. Maybe you keep it on your nightstand, opening it when you cannot sleep, where you need the reassurance as it

appears in Psalm 30:5, that “weeping may linger through the night, but joy comes in the morning.”

When I asked my students at SPU, where I am currently teaching one class, about their hope for the future, I found myself wondering if they have Bibles on their nightstands. Why? Because the vast majority expressed utter hopelessness with regard to the future. They felt defeated and scared. I often feel that way too. But then I remember Bonhoeffer. He continued in the face of overwhelming adversity. How? He read his Bible, constantly, poring over it for words of consolation and encouragement, words that God would never leave him no matter how dire the circumstance.

Yet Bonhoeffer had another source of reassurance and strength. I imagine next to his bed in the cold cell of a Nazi prison on wobbly nightstand not only a Bible but a small hymnal. In its pages he found the “beautiful hymns” of Paul Gerhardt, hymns that gave him strength.

Perhaps we should have hymnals on our nightstands too – or at least a copy of a song we sang in worship that particularly moved us and gave us strength. Can you imagine letting the gospel we sing on Sundays give you hope throughout the week? Can you imagine the assurance of the gospel, spoken in our readings but sung as well?

* * *

Dear Eberhard,

All I want to do today is to send you a short greeting. I expect you are often with us here in your thoughts and are always glad of any sign of life, even if the theological conversation stops for a moment. These theological thoughts are, in fact, always occupying my mind; but there are times when I am just content to live the life of faith without worrying about its problems. At those times I simply take pleasure in the day’s readings [from Scripture] – in particular those of yesterday and today; and I’m always glad to go back to Paul Gerhardt’s beautiful hymns.

– Dietrich