

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Welcome to Morning Prayers, here in the Appleton Chapel of the Memorial Church. Please rise for our Responsorial Psalm, which is number 39 in your Black Psalter.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"I said, 'I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue. I will keep a muzzle on my mouth, as long as the wicked are in my presence.'"

Congregation:

"I was silent and still. I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"My heart became hot within me, while I mused, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue."

Congregation:

"Lord, let me know my end and what is the measure of my days. Let me know how fleeting my life is."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath."

Congregation:

"Surely everyone goes about as a shadow. Surely, for nothing, they are in turmoil. They heap up, and do not know who will gather."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry. Do not hold your peace at my tears."

Congregation:

"For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears."

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

"Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more."

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

This is a reading from the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, beginning at the 47th verse. "Jesus said, 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. When it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down and put the good into baskets, but threw out the bad. So, it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where they will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?' They answered. 'Yes.' And He said to them, 'Therefore, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure, what is new and what is old.'" Your end of the lesson.

77 years ago tomorrow, the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed at Flossenbürg concentration camp. Bonhoeffer is the saint we remember tomorrow. He's a favorite theologian of mine, maybe in my opinion, the most important 20th century theologian, not just for the brilliance of his thought, but also because his theology was forced to be lived into the circumstances he faced.

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 to a kind of well-to-do family in Breslau. His father, Karl was a famous neuroscientist and psychiatrist who got into sort of public arguments with Freud about the nature of the brain. He was the seventh of eighth children, among his siblings were many other scholars and scientists and theologians. He himself proved to be uniquely brilliant even among this brilliant family. He received his first doctorate, yet to get two in Germany. He received his first doctorate by the age of 21.

Too young to be ordained, he went to the United States to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He found American theology and theological education to be insipid. He wrote back home and said, "There is no theology here." But he discovered two things in New York City, Reinhold Niebuhr, who was teaching at Union, and who became a conversation partner of his. So, I guess there was a little bit of theology. And the other thing he found was the Black Church. He said, "The only church where the gospel was truly preached in New York City was the Black Church." He joined the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, taught Sunday school there. So, again, he found some theology.

He returned to Germany, in the early '30s, he was ordained, when he came of age to be so, Hitler was made chancellor on January 30th, 1930 and two days later, he recorded a radio address that warned German people about descending into a cult of the führer. His address was cut off halfway through. A few months later, in April of 1933, he raised the alarm about antisemitism in Germany, saying that the church must not simply bandage the victims crushed under the wheel of antisemitism. But must realize that it itself is a spoke in the wheel of that antisemitism.

Shortly afterwards, the German church became notified. Bonhoeffer started a Separatist church. He went to London to pastor German congregations there. He was rebuked by some prominent fellow theologians for leading Germany in a time of crisis. He was a famous pacifist. He wrote about the necessity of pacifism. And at this time, he was offered a spot in Gandhi's ashram in India. But he returned to Germany and started a secret seminary to train pastors for his secret church.

Things were descending badly in Germany. So, he went again to New York, but after two weeks in New York, knew he had to return to Germany. He could not escape the fight. He had to be in the fight. He returned and joined the Abwehr as a double agent. He couriered messages to the allies, especially former church colleagues in England, the Bishop of Chichester would receive messages from him and share them with military officials. As a member of the Abwehr, which was the military intelligence unit, he was fully aware of the extent of the atrocities going on in Germany. So, he and some of his brothers helped smuggle Jewish people to Switzerland.

He was a committed pacifist. He wrote eloquently about Jesus' command, that we love our enemy and not give into violence that we turn the other cheek. But he joined a plot that some of his brothers organized to assassinate Hitler. He was caught, imprisoned. He had a relative fairly high up in the administration who prevented his execution. But as the war came to a close, even had a chance to escape, but he declined to escape, because he was fearful for the reprisals that would be visited upon his family.

As the war came to a close, he was in Tegel prison for a while, then moved to Buchenwald and then to Flossenbürg, where he was hanged with six others less than a week before the camp was freed. His brother and two brothers-in-law were also executed. There's one eyewitness account of his murder. All the people to be executed were stripped naked, and then hanged. This eyewitness says that Bonhoeffer prayed quietly and then died quickly. This is probably a lie. We learned later that this eyewitness was a doctor whose job at the camp was to revive nearly dead victims, so they could be hanged again and again, over the course of somewhere between four and six hours. He was probably lying to deflect his own guilt.

Two things to recall I think about Bonhoeffer, apart from just the courage of his witness. First, this idea that he was a pacifist, but then joined this assassination plot. This troubles sometimes my theology students. If he was a pacifist, why would he join an assassination plot without giving up his pacifism? But Bonhoeffer said, "The ultimate question for a responsible man," this is a quote now, "The ultimate question for the responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself historically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live." Without Christian morals, would you concern with making ourselves pure rather than with making the world better? Making it better for future generations. In fact, he saw this fetishization of purity to be the root of fascism. To make ourselves pure quickly becomes making our church pure or making our people pure or making our nation pure and this cannot give way to violence.

And so he said, "The discussion of pacifism was not about whether we make ourselves pure, it is whether we take responsibility to the awful things we might be coerced by the world, forced by circumstance to do, to not transmute terrible things we must into virtues, but to do them and take responsibility for them." The other thing I think that's important, especially for us in remembering Bonhoeffer is that towards the end of his life, in these letters he wrote from prison to his friends, he said that the church had lost all credibility. This participation, this antisemitism and what happened in Germany meant that the church had lost all its credibility. And in the future, it could no longer act with any sort of confidence.

He said, "In the future, the church must become," what he called, "An arcane discipline. It should consist entirely of private prayer and good works, not big institutions towering over places. But private prayer and good works." And he said, "Maybe over time, if we do that, we will gain some credibility and something else will be possible, but it is not possible now. And private prayer and good works are what we must give ourselves to."

A week from today, we will recall the brutal torture of another man who also said, "Pray in secret and love one another." As we follow this other man to Jerusalem this holy week, Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests to us what following that man might look like. Please, rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And with your spirit.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us pray. Embolden our lives, O Lord, and inspire our faiths that we, following the example of your servant Dietrich Bonhoeffer, might embrace your call with undivided hearts through Jesus Christ, our savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. One God forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Now, let us pray the words Jesus taught us saying. Our Father.

Congregation:

Our Father.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Who art in heaven.

Congregation:

Who art in heaven.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Hallowed be Thy name.

Congregation:

Hallowed by Thy name.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Thy kingdom come.

Congregation:

Thy kingdom come.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Thy will be done.

Congregation:

Thy will be done.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

On earth as it is in heaven.

Congregation:

On earth as it is in heaven.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Give us this day our daily bread.

Congregation:

Give us this day our daily bread.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

And forgive us our trespasses.

Congregation:

And forgive us our trespasses.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

Congregation:

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

And lead us not into temptation.

Congregation:

And lead us not into temptation.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

But deliver us from evil.

Congregation:

But deliver us from evil.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:
For thine is the kingdom.

Congregation:
For thine is the kingdom.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:
And the power.

Congregation:
And the power.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:
And the glory.

Congregation:
And the glory.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:
Forever and ever.

Congregation:
Forever and ever.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:
Amen. Let us join in singing the hymn 307.

Congregation/Choir:
(singing).

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:
With the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which passes all our understanding, keep your hearts and minds and the knowledge and love of God and of God's son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, and the blessing of God almighty the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you all and remain with you always. Amen.

Congregation:
Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:
Let us bless the Lord.

This transcript was exported on Apr 12, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.