

*Costly Witness, Costly Grace, Free in Christ: The Life and Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*  
Session Four - *Letters and Papers from Prison*  
Pastor Lose – January/February 2024 – Mount Olivet Lutheran Church

### **Focus Scripture Passages**

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. –Romans 12:2*

*I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. –John 17:15*

*And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. –Revelation 21:2*

### **Overview**

While in the Tegel prison, imprisoned for suspected crimes against the Nazi state, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with the help of many and at great risk to them and to him, was able to smuggle out and receive in return, a number of letters, many to his closest friend, Eberhard Bethge. After Bonhoeffer's death, Bethge collected some of the letters Bonhoeffer wrote to others and circulated them along with the letters he had received among a small group of friends and colleagues. Bethge was originally hesitant to publish them, in part because he feared that Bonhoeffer was sharing half-developed thoughts as part of an ongoing conversation and that these theological "trial balloons" might be misinterpreted. (He was right!)

In 1951, Bethge published the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and they were immediately and immensely popular (and were translated into English a year later). They established the previously relatively unknown Bonhoeffer as a major Christian thinker and spurred review and eventual publication of many of Bonhoeffer's other works. Of particular interest and import are the last letters Bonhoeffer wrote where he reflects on the need to develop or, perhaps better, embrace a "religionless Christianity" in order to be relevant to a "world come of age." It is these passages that sparked the most conversation and controversy, as many believed – incorrectly, most Bonhoeffer scholars think – that he was advocating a Christianity without any notion of God; that is, a complete and radical secularizing of Christianity. In distinction, Bonhoeffer was attempting to pierce through the structures and practices of "religion" – which he understands as our attempts to move toward God – to offer a renewed and relevant grace-centered faith – which Bonhoeffer believes is how we receive God's gracious self-movement toward us as a free gift.

What, then, does Bonhoeffer mean by a "religionless Christianity"? That continues to be a question of animated conversation. I will venture my thoughts with more than a little trepidation. I believe Bonhoeffer was wary of any religious practices or institutions that oriented believers away from the actual world in which we live toward a God who exists somewhere else (heaven, in our hearts,

whatever). This move to look for God outside the concrete circumstances of our world and neighbor runs completely against what we see in Scripture and, particularly, in Jesus Christ. The incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection (particularly understood as a “bodily resurrection” in 1 Cor. 15) testify to God’s love for and commitment to the world. *There is nowhere else to find God than in this world and, especially, in those around us.* The Church therefore is created to be the community of those who have experienced new life in Christ here and now and witness to God’s love for the world by caring for their neighbors. It is the neighbor – both “the one nearby” and “the one in need” – that we encounter God as Jesus modeled.

Religionless Christianity, then, is a commitment to live the faith of Christ by being Christ-like – seeing others as God’s beloved children and being committed to suffering with and for them that they may experience God’s love. This is not an attempt to move toward God, but a response to the realization that, in Christ, God has decisively moved toward and embraced all that it means to be us – to be human, vulnerable, fragile, mortal. Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity,” therefore, is not the rejection of Scripture, but rather living into the fulfillment Scripture. It is not a rejection of God’s “otherness,” but rather recognizing God’s decision to enter into this mortal life through Christ out of love. It is not even a rejection of “heaven” as much as it is a recognition that heaven or, better, new life in Christ, begins here and now and continues beyond our experience. Bonhoeffer believed that modern people, which he described as “man come of age” was in some ways ahead of the church in rejecting the dominance of religious practices that promised union with God rather than practicing a vulnerable dependence on each other and God. The only way to be Christian, therefore, is to be radically and fully present and committed to those we meet in the world. This “being for others” is how we experience Jesus most fully.

### **Questions/Quotations for Further Reflection and Discussion**

Bonhoeffer was fond of posing questions to express his thoughts, so I will let him speak for himself. How do you hear Bonhoeffer’s words about a “religionless” world and people? How does it shape your sense of your life of faith and participation in Mount Olivet? What implications does it have for our “life together” here and now in this congregation? How would you answer Bonhoeffer’s questions.

*“We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as ‘religious’ do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious’...*

*“And if therefore man becomes radically religionless—and I think that is already more or less the case (else, how is it, for example, that this war, in contrast to all previous ones, is not calling forth any ‘religious’ reaction?)—what does that mean for ‘Christianity’?”*

*Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is a religionless Christianity?”*