

TEXT: Lectionary readings
THEME: God is faithful
SUBJECT: Faith
TITLE: Fear and Faith

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
11 August 2019
Messiah Moravian
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A two year old child standing by the side of a pool, looking into the eyes of her father in water up to his chest, arms outstretched, calling her name, inviting her to jump, is poised between fear and faith. The difference between leaping into her father's waiting arms and turning and running for safety is trust.

Whether she is consciously aware of the feelings and thoughts running through her heart and head, she is discerning if her father is trustworthy. Since she knows her father, since he has given her no reason not to trust him, she gleefully jumps into his waiting arms.

This discernment process will play out in hundreds of relationships as she matures. Whether she lives in fear or in faith will in large part be determined by the trustworthiness of her family, her friends, her teachers and coaches, the police in her community, her employers.

Mary grew up in what we now call a dysfunctional family, one not known for trustworthy relationships. Sitting in an AA group with her list of things she feels bad about, grudges and humiliations, cherrypicking what she will share with the group, she is floored to see how fear has governed pretty much every moronic choice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his twin sister, Sabine, were the sixth and seventh of eight children. Their father was a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Berlin, a prominent critic of Sigmund Freud. Their mother was a teacher and granddaughter of a Protestant theologian and chaplain in the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Love and great expectations governed this family's life.

Dietrich, his brother and two of his brothers-in-law, actively participated in the resistance to Hitler. From the beginning, the family saw the rise of Nazi ideology as a threat to the well-being of Germany. When the July 20 plot to assassinate Hitler failed, the fate of Dietrich, Klaus, Hans and Rudiger was sealed. Each was executed, Dietrich on the direct order of Hitler just a few days before the fall of Germany.

From his prison cell Bonhoeffer reflected on his experience: "We learned to tell cheap lies, to go along with obvious wrong doing. When violence was heaped on the defenseless, we looked away. What once joined humankind in sacred bonds was shredded and defaced.

“Betrayed were friendship and faithfulness. We the offspring of devout generations, once the defenders of justice and truth, became despisers of God and humanity, as Hell looked on, laughing.”

Sabine Dramm has written the story of the Bonhoeffer family’s involvement in the resistance. To understand the resistance, she says, we need to understand that Nazi ideology depended on the permanence of fear. Resistance is inconceivable without the surmounting of personal fear, inconceivable without the courage to endanger oneself to bring about the end of the system of fear.

What made it possible for Dietrich Bonhoeffer to overcome his personal fear to confront an ideology that generated and perpetuated fear? After a period of extreme tension, marked by feelings of isolation and an inability to reach a decision, Bonhoeffer achieved an inner stability that he passed on to others. He lived from the assurance that in spite of all appearances the world was in God’s hand.

This faith was the basis of his indestructible hope for the present and future of the world, even though this reality was visible only from afar. For the conspiracy, Bonhoeffer’s special gift was to give a sign of hope for the world, to believe in its future and in the greater power of God. Again and again, Bonhoeffer put this faith in God and the future into words that strengthened his fellow conspirators.

It was largely, Dramm concludes, his faith that fired his oppositional attitude to the Nazi dictatorship. During his imprisonment Bonhoeffer experienced an intensity and power of faith that in its depth is beyond anything that might be called “normal.”

It is a long way from a two year old child jumping into the pool, trusting she will be caught by her waiting father, and risking everything in the fight against the demons of destruction and death.

Yet, in both cases fear must be overcome. Just as the little girl cannot know the thrill of the leap apart from an act of trust, so we cannot know the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of unseen realities, apart from acting in faith.