

Are We Still of Any Use?

Acts 9:1-19a

John 21:1-23

“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’”

In an essay entitled, “After Ten Years,” written to his closest friends in the resistance and received four months before his arrest by the Gestapo, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks, “Are we still of any use?” “We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the art of equivocation and pretense; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use?”

Surely some form of the same question haunted Saul, in the singular, as he sat in darkness, neither eating nor drinking, an unwitting guest in the house on the street called Straight. Likewise, Simon Peter and the rest of the disciples must have asked this of each other in the aftermath of Jesus’ death, prompting them initially to return to their lives as fishermen. It is the question entertained when a blinding light shatters our certainty and then calls us by name; it is the question we ask after a season of risking our lives on some venture that appears to have failed. In fact, at every turn in the road that is our one, precious, unrepeatable life, if we have our wits about us, we question our usefulness. I think of the young, after years of preparation, when graduation is in sight but no one is calling them by name to be of use—or calling them at all, the young ask; in mid-life, when you are weary in well-doing, wondering whether you can muster the passion to keep on keeping on, or whether, instead, a new passion will propel you into some version of a mid-life crisis, you ask, “Am I still of any use?”; and with more years behind us than ahead of us: given the things we have done and the things we have left undone, given the consequences, intended and unintended, we ask: Am I still of any use?

When we ask the question of our usefulness, we lean in to hear the response of the world around us. We measure ourselves against the usual metrics: a chore when we are little, a job or, if we are lucky, a vocation, a house full of dependents, to name a few outward signs that we are valued, have a role to play, a contribution to make. Knowing we are needed in a family, a community, an institution, a cause, a company; having some tangible evidence of our impact on something lasting and larger than ourselves; being remembered or included: this is how the world around us answers Bonhoeffer’s question in the affirmative.

But there comes a day, a season in life, a turn in the road when every evidence of our usefulness is called into question by the very world that once confirmed our utility. So a job is lost, a nexus of relationships gone, a cause disappoints you, the children leave home, retirement approaches, your mind or your body begins to fail you, compelling you to ask all over again, “Am I still of any use?” But now it feels as though you have been blinded on the road to Damascus or just come off a disastrous week in Jerusalem. Maybe you, yourself, are the cause of this great break in your life, having done so much damage to yourself or to another that you are rendered useless by some moral failure, regarded as refuse by the world that once revered you.

In this unasked for state, you may always choose, as Annie Dillard put it, “to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage.” But if the stories before us this morning are any clue, precisely when you are vulnerable and even undefended, the God who has been waiting for just this opening, this crack, this break in the action, may enter in, also unasked, to use you still in the service of God’s kingdom come.

Notice, in the first place, that Saul and Peter were the last two people on earth the world would thought to have used. I know I am skating on thin ice to say this, but Saul must have been a Ted Cruz sort of character before that day on the road to Damascus. A zealot who was the only true believer, the only pure upholder of the law, the only righteous man capable of doing God’s will—and a master debater to boot! I cannot imagine even his fellow Pharisees liking him very much. Ananias, who would be used as the means of God’s grace toward Saul, was afraid for his life when God told him to go and lay hands on him: “Lord, I have heard from many about this man,” Ananias pleads. In response God tells Ananias that Saul is “an instrument whom I have chosen....”

An instrument chosen of God to be of use, meaning that the rest of Saul’s life would not belong to Saul: it would belong to God; meaning Saul would no longer be the master of his own fate: he would be given a destiny by the God who had destined him in love from the foundation of the world. “To speak of choosing your own destiny,” writes a theologically wired political theorist named Glenn Tinder, “. . . is a misunderstanding of human beings and their powers—a misunderstanding at the heart of the present crisis of civilization. Perhaps people can create styles of life and control the general order of their daily existence. But their destinies must be given them. . . . One carries out a destiny under

constraint and not as an act of play, improvisation or spontaneous self-expression. The constraint comes from the life one feels called upon to live.”

Likewise, of all the disciples except Judas, Peter’s denial of Jesus in the courtyard should have made him useless to the early church going forward. He too was a zealot, perhaps a more endearing one (feel the Bern...), utterly certain that he would stand by Jesus to the end—until he denied him three times. A handful of days later, when the risen Christ appears on the shore, Peter shamelessly swims to him, exhibiting an ego-strength that is utterly unimaginable to me! Had I been Peter, I imagine myself crawling on my knees to Jesus, begging him for the mercy I knew I did not deserve. Instead, Peter seems ready to pick up right where he left off, until Jesus asks Peter whether or not he loves him. Three times he asks and, by the third time, Peter is hurt, blindsided. It was Peter’s Damascus road. When the conversation was finished, when the illusion of his own usefulness was shattered, only then was Peter of use to God. From that day forward, Jesus said to him, you will be taken where you do not wish to go, in the service of God’s kingdom come.

So in the first place, it is often the very people, blindsided by their own brokenness, who are still of use to God. In fact, they are particularly of use to God! God calls them by name, commands them to follow, and gives them a destiny whose usefulness may not be apparent until they lie to die.

Therefore, in the second place, assuming you are that broken person, notice that as your life is used by God in the service of God’s kingdom come, your life ceases to be your own; ceases to be all about you, about your success or personal achievement or even about your highest ideals. When Christ calls you, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer, he bids you come and die: die to the life you have lived to yourself and born anew into the life given you by God to live. “Not the work that you choose,” Martin Luther wrote of our usefulness to God, “not the suffering you devise, but the road that is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire—that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple.” To be clear, Saul was still zealous, but the zeal once directed toward his own righteousness was redeemed and used for two thousand years by God as the means of God’s grace toward those of us called out and into the church. Had God not used Saul, you and I would not be in this sanctuary today! Likewise, Peter’s passion before the crucifixion was spent on being the first, the best, the most courageous, albeit the most impetuous of the disciples. But after breakfast that morning, his ego mortally wounded and his sense of self shaken, God redeemed and used Peter’s passion to proclaim the gospel as only the forgiven can: with an urgency born of grace.

Of this turn, this transformation, this redemption, Bonhoeffer would write from his cell in Tegel prison that “one must abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner . . .” Rather, he said, one must live “unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities [because in] so doing, we throw ourselves completely into the hands of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world. . . . How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray,” he asks, “when we share in God’s sufferings through a life of this kind?” This man who *had asked*, only three years before, whether he and his co-conspirators were still of any use, given who they had become in what they believed to be the thick of discipleship—their equivocation and pretense, their suspicion of others that kept them from being truthful and open, the intolerable conflicts that wore them down and made them cynical—this same man could only confess as he walked to the gallows seventy-one years ago yesterday: “Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”

Though the final thing to notice? Bonhoeffer asks the question in the plural and in the context of the confessing church attempting to live out its destiny. Are we, as followers of Jesus Christ, however haltingly, still of any use? Until they too are executed, Peter and Paul spend their lives calling people out and into the community of faith, the ecclesia, the koinonia, the fellowship-creating reality of Christ’s presence in the world, a presence that threatens every metric the world uses to measure human worth. To be of use, according to the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church, the church is to proclaim the good news of God’s victory over death in word and deed “even at the risk of losing its life. . . .” When God calls a people, he bids them come and die. “Are we as *Christ’s church* still of any use?”

The Sundays after Easter are the Sundays when we ask what it means for the church to be of use to God in the world, to live together “unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. . . . throw[ing] ourselves completely into the hands of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world.” In the season ahead, in these times that are more treacherous than we dare to admit, I pray that this congregation, as well as the church universal, will be blindsided by the God who means to put us on a road clean contrary to all that we choose or contrive or desire, that we may be of use still in the service of God’s kingdom come. Thanks be to God.