

Haydenville Congregational Church

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John 15:9-17

“You want me to do what?”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 to a prominent upper-class family in Breslau, Germany. He was fourteen when he surprised and dismayed his parents by announcing that he intended to become a theologian and a pastor. When Bonhoeffer’s older brother told him not to waste his life in such a “poor, feeble, boring, petty, bourgeois institution as the Church,” 14-year-old Dietrich replied, “If what you say is true, I shall reform it!”

Bonhoeffer studied at some of the finest schools in Europe and collected a fist-full of impressive degrees. He seemed destined for greatness as a scholar and pastor. But his promising academic and ecclesiastical career was dramatically altered when the Nazis rose to power in 1933. Bonhoeffer raised the first and virtually the only voice for church resistance to Hitler’s persecution of the Jews when he declared that the church must not simply “bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam the spoke in the wheel itself.” With his colleague Martin Niemoller, Bonhoeffer organized The Confessing Church—a small but strong source of Christian opposition to the Nazi government. The Confessing Church insisted that Christ, not Hitler, was the head of the church.

In 1938, in secret Bonhoeffer joined the German Resistance movement when he was introduced to a group seeking to overthrow Hitler. He knew that he would soon be called to serve in Hitler’s army and yet as a committed pacifist who opposed the Nazi regime, he could never swear an oath to Hitler and fight in the army. But refusing to serve was a capital offense.

Bonhoeffer solved this dilemma by leaving Germany—he accepted an invitation to be a visiting scholar at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He believed that if he came to New York he could avoid military service in Germany and he could save the Confessing Church movement.

But once in New York, Bonhoeffer became distressed about his decision and underwent a long, difficult period of discernment. He wrote to his friend Reinhold Niebuhr: “I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period with the people of Germany. Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization.”

Bonhoeffer could have stayed at Union Seminary and lived his life as an honored professor but he chose to return to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic. When he got on the boat to head back to Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote later, he was filled with a sense of peace because he knew he was obeying what God wanted him to do.

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer joined an underground group at the center of the anti-Hitler resistance. Although an avowed pacifist and pastor, he had come to believe that Hitler must be assassinated. In time, Bonhoeffer knew about and was involved in detailed plans to kill Hitler. He did not justify his actions but accepted that he was taking guilt upon himself and felt called to do that. The plots failed. Bonhoeffer and his compatriots were discovered in April 1943 and arrested.

Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for a year and a half awaiting trial. He ministered to fellow prisoners and to the prison staff with such impact that he won the admiration of the guards. His deeply moving letters were smuggled out by sympathetic guards and later published.

On April 9, 1945, in a cold, dank cell in Flossenburg, a little town in Southern Germany, two prison guards appeared at his cell and said, “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us.” From there they took him, stripped him, and hung him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a powerful illustration for the church and for Christians around the world in the matter of obedience to God. His martyrdom stands as a shining example of true obedience to the living Christ. His life, his writing, his words and his witness remind us that as Christians we are not called simply to love Jesus, we are not called simply to follow Jesus, we are also called to obey Jesus.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the words “command” and “commandment” five times—five times in one short reading. In this passage in John, Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples and go in obedience to his death. He commands his followers to obey him—to love him by living as he instructs.

I think Christians throughout time and including today have been better at the love me and follow me parts of the Jesus movement than the obey me parts.

Obedience is a tough one—it was for our ancient brothers and sisters and it is for us today. It is a difficult word and an unpopular concept. But it is part of our faith tradition—and what we are called to do.

Obedience may be particularly hard for those of you who identify as feminists, or as progressive Christians, or as refugees from the free spirit of the 1960s. But I remind you that obedience is actually a part of all of our lives....it is not a matter of asking: will I be obedient or disobedient?

It is a matter of asking: which master will I obey?

All of us each day are obeying somebody. Each day we answer to a number of masters—our peers, our family, our friends, our government, we even conform to popular fads. All of us are living our lives on the basis of external sources of authority that we did not think up or create.

So the issue is not: will I be obedient? The question is: whom do I obey?

The great theologian Bob Dylan wrote the song “Gotta Serve Somebody.” Listen to some of the words,

*You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody,
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

*You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride,
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side,
You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair,
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody,
it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

As Christians we understand the truth in Dylan's words and we decide to, agree to, and work hard to serve God. Essentially Christians are people who believe that in serving God, in obeying Jesus, we find true freedom, we find our true destiny, we find abundant life. That is what Jesus is urging in today's Gospel reading. Jesus urges us to obediently love one another and to follow him so that the world will see him through us—so that the world might look at the way we live together and experience the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

Bonhoeffer's story is remarkable and his example is daunting. Few of us will face such spiritual challenges in our lives. But obedience to God is not just found in the dramatic, amazing Bonhoeffer stories, obedience to God is found in daily decisions that shape our lives and make us who we are. Serving God, being obedient to God is a difficult discipline. We struggle to hear the will of God, the words of God and to follow. Inevitably, obedience to God involves being still enough often enough to hear God speaking to us. And to be faithful enough to respond.

I was for ten years Dean of Religious Life at Mount Holyoke College. When I felt it was time for me to leave the academic world and pastor a church, I began looking around the Pioneer Valley for a church where my gifts and talents fit well with a church's character and needs. I searched widely and eventually received an offer from an impressive church with a strong congregation, a hefty budget and a lovely historic building.

Then Rev. Peter Wells in Western Mass. UCC office called me and said, "Wait, Andrea, don't take that church just yet, I want you to look at Haydenville."

I was close to taking the other church, and I did not think Haydenville was what I had in mind. I said to Peter, "You want me to do what?"

Many of you know this story well, some of you lived through this story with me. In a short-hand version, I will just say that I came and looked at the Haydenville Congregational Church, I even preached here as a supply minister because their pastor was gone. I found here a church with 15 members in the pews and building in serious disrepair. I found a church with a proud history and strong faith but small and failing—maybe even near closing.

I thought about the other church and its robust membership, large budget and lovely building. "I don't think I can take Haydenville," I told Peter Wells.

"I don't think I can take it, do it, I'm not called there."

"Pray on it Andrea," Peter said gently. "Just pray on it."

And being faithful and occasionally obedient, I did just that.
I prayed on the decision I had to make between the two churches. And I heard
God say: I want you to take and revive the Haydenville Church.
And I said, “You want me to do what?”

But God does not have to be told to speak up. God’s words were clear and direct.
Take the broken church, anyone can take the thriving church. Embrace the 15
people, tackle the disrepair. I want you to serve in Haydenville.

You want me to do what?

I felt unequal to the job, I felt too old and inept to roll up my sleeves and work on
repairing a building, I felt unprepared to raise the kind of money the church would
need, I felt ill-equipped to grow a congregation. You want me to do what?

But I remembered the words of Madeleine L’Engle who said, “No one in the Bible
is qualified to do what they are called by God to do.”

Obedience is not my strong suit, but I said yes.

Not yes to Peter Wells.

Not yes to the Diane Scott and the Search Committee.

Not yes to the United Church of Christ.

I said YES to God.

You want me to do what? Okay. I’ll try.

You have had these experiences in your lives as well...times when you felt pulled
and called to do something, to act in ways that you did not have in mind. You
have made decisions that you did not fully understand but believed were
God-centered, God-led, God-driven.

You have had these experiences and I think you know that being obedient to God
requires three things:

** a relationship with God that is strong enough so you can hear God’s words,
receive God’s messages, feel God’s guiding hand;

** an ability to discern—to push back, to “test every spirit” as it says in
1 John 4:1—to make sure the “leading” as Quakers call it, is a true leading from
God. Am I truly discerning the will of God? Should I gather with others in my
faith community and test this spirit, pray on this together, push back to make sure
this is the real deal?

** a willingness to go with God, to believe that once led, you can relax and follow....a faith strong enough to say Here I am (as Samuel said to God).
I will do this, with your help O Lord.

In all the Bible stories, in the Hebrew Scriptures AND the New Testament, God uses people who are inadequate for the job, unequal to the task, frightened about their mission, unsuited for the work they are called to do.
And to all of them God says....you can do this, I will help.

If we are in regular conversation with God, we will hear God's words and guidance. If we are close to God in practice and in prayer, we will feel God nudge. And if we are faithful, we will obey.

Obedience. It's a word that gets caught in our throats.

Obedience. It's a concept we love to hate.

But something got Dietrich Bonhoeffer to step onto the boat—the last steamer to leave for America while war was raging in his homeland.

It was neither foolishness nor courage. It was obedience.

And on a much smaller scale but also significant, something gets us to live the Christian life—one of caring and compassion, speaking out for justice, including and embracing those on the margins of power, taking risks for peace and equity, struggling on when we are tired and running low on hope. Something called obedience that is uncomfortable and hard to define....something called obedience that is powerful but elusive...**something called obedience to the will of God propels us forward.**

And often it is only in hindsight that we understand that **God was doing what God does well—leading by pushing.**

We are led, my sisters and brothers, in our confusion and doubt, we are led.

And we are obedient enough to go.

I think I said yes to this church out of obedience. And now I thank God for that every single day.

And I am grateful for the many ways large and small that YOU are obedient to the will of God— ways I see in you that I am not always sure you see in yourselves.

Remember: it is fine for you and for me to stop and say, “You want me to do what?” And then to pray, to pray hard, on the answer we receive. Amen.