

## **Reflections on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Ethics and theology by John Swinton**

*Notes by Bill Gaventa*

One area on his thinking, on his stance on the value of the human body and of human life.

“No worthless life before God” Every life is a valuable life. Value because of created life.

Theology formed by the village of Bethel, where he was pastor. Place for weak and vulnerable, next door was a concentration camp..

Nazi, what was the economic point of keeping these people alive.

Who was important, who was not important.

Against this backdrop, Bonhoeffer worshipped with people with disabilities First hand experience of Bethel of embodied neighborly love. Way of being church wherein the church knows what it can be about and what it cannot be about. Bethel remained example of church. Forms of weakness were an affront to worldly power. Letter to grandmother, lives of disabled people revealed truth of existence, model of what it means to be human, vulnerable, weak, contingent. Epilepsy struck him in particular. Reminder of the fragility of health and defenselessness of human life. Being defenseless gives people view of what life was about. A place of revelation. What the church looked like. Centrality of weakness and dependency. To love one another is the key. Contingency and interdependency were the foundations.

Vanier lived Bonhoeffer in many ways.

Showed how insane the Nazi extermination program was. None of us can do anything others. Utilitarian makes no sense. Not just corrupt but mad. Madness today thinks that the sick can be eradicated. Mad thinks you can distinguish between health and the absence of disability. View of euthanasia....theology from below. We need to see world history from “below,” When he looked at Bethel, sees humanness. When he looks at Nazi, sees nothing but brokenness and madness. A new anthropology from below.

Health was fundamental to the ways that Nazis justified euthanasia. Respect for healthy body, disgust for others. Aiming to build a community without unhealthy body. Life became mechanized. Life, body, became like machine. No longer useful machine, you throw it away. If everyone is expendable, then all kinds of implications. If we only exist because we can do certain things, no one is safe.

Nazis used term “natural” in ways where disability was un-natural.

Bonhoeffer, “natural” movement toward redemption, what is unnatural is what stands against that. All bodies are inherently valuable. Cruellest life before God becomes priceless. Valuable because they are creatures. Sick must not be treated as guilty. Must not be seen as “spoiling community.”

Gospel needs to be seen to be believed. Church is place where Jesus is found and touched. Call for church to be church in most difficult times.

Today...idea that people are useless is rearing its head in many ways. Austerity pushes this further, poorest people are a burden. Leads to series of attacks on people with disabilities. Dangerous to be poor, dangerous to be disabled.

Bonhoeffer noted that church was quite happy to be a Nazi church. Are we moving into love, or sliding into evil.

Observations on epilepsy and health, health goes from moment to moment. All of us are healthy, and all of us are unhealthy.

Impact of Vanier on Hauerwas. Place where the gospel is seen. The gospel needs to be seen to be believed.

When you look at his life, looks like he failed. Ethics was not just about right and wrong, but with faith in God. Sometimes have to do wrong in order to do right, but still under judgement. Task of Christians not to be on the winning side, but to be faithful to what God has given us to do.