

ARE WE STILL OF ANY USE?

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
May 20, 2018

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into a prominent Berlin family in 1906, the youngest boy in a family of eight children. His eldest brother was killed in the First World War, a humiliating defeat for Germany that plunged the nation into chaos and despair, and prepared the way for the rise of militant National Socialism under Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer received his doctorate in theology at age twenty-one, then came to Union Seminary here in New York. He studied ethics with Reinhold Niebuhr and embraced Gandhi's approach to nonviolent resistance, which significantly shaped Bonhoeffer's early approach to resisting Hitler.

Although Hitler had the early support of most German church leaders, Bonhoeffer became wary of him upon returning to Germany, especially after Hitler made anti-Semitism into law. Even so, when Bonhoeffer was asked to deliver the eulogy at the funeral of his brother-in-law's Jewish father, he declined because of pressure from other church leaders. It was a decision he came bitterly to regret.

As Hitler's vendetta against the Jews became more pronounced, Bonhoeffer, though a staunch pacifist, became convinced that passive resistance was insufficient. "We have been silent witnesses of many evil deeds," he wrote. "We have been drenched by many storms. We have learned the art of equivocation and pretense...Are we still of any use?" Reluctantly, but with great conviction, Bonhoeffer joined a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, an effort that ultimately failed. In 1943, the Gestapo arrested Bonhoeffer and took him to Tegel Prison in Berlin, where he spent the next two years.

Though Bonhoeffer was brutally interrogated and regularly tortured during his time in prison, his writings from that period – a book on ethics and long letters to friends and family – have remained influential ever since. In April of 1945, along with his brother Klauss and two of his brothers-in-law, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis for his role in the resistance.

Several weeks ago, I was able to spend two days in Gaza. I visited the headquarters of two international relief organizations, as well as a hospital, a clinic, a refugee camp, a water desalinization plant, a church, and a private home. Because I visited midweek, the protests at the security fence weren't happening, though we drove within a hundred meters or so of where they have been taking place.

As I witnessed the increasing peril of daily life in Gaza, and as I came face-to-face with the increasing desperation and despair of its people, Bonhoeffer's question persisted in my mind. I had come to Gaza from a part of the world that has been a silent witness to many evil deeds, a part of the world that has perfected the art of equivocation

and pretense, especially when confronted by human suffering. “Are we still of any use?” I wondered to myself. “What can I do?”

After all, I’m not a diplomat, or a politician, or an economist, or an engineer, or a physician, or a military strategist. Like Bonhoeffer, I’m a theologian and a preacher. I concluded that I can do what Bonhoeffer did: bear witness to the moral challenges of our time as I understand them.

As I left Gaza, I felt compelled to speak out. On Tuesday, Reuters published my commentary about my visit. Many of you have read it, but for those of you who haven’t, I will recap for you its salient points.

With the peace process stalled and the protests increasing, I wrote, living conditions in Gaza have grown increasingly desperate: only an average of five hours of electricity per day, dwindling supplies of food and medicine, staggeringly high unemployment rates, rising levels of water pollution and disease, and an economy that has virtually come to a halt. Nonetheless, nothing’s wrong in Gaza that, on a humanitarian level, can’t be significantly improved in a few months. A fundamental tenet of civilized behavior in the modern world is that human beings shouldn’t die of disease, starvation, or other forms of neglect while political conflicts are addressed.

Gaza is not Syria or Yemen. Much of the infrastructure is intact and working when the electricity is on, and the basic institutions – homes, schools, hospitals, businesses – still function, albeit precariously.

What must be done? First, Gaza needs electricity 24/7. Egypt and Israel can supply fuel to existing power plants, and both can turn on electric lines into Gaza. Second, Washington needs to restore full funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides education, medical care, and food aid to more than half of Gaza’s 2 million people. The United States, UNRWA’s largest donor nation, gave \$355 million to UNRWA in 2017 for Gaza, but the Trump administration currently plans to give only \$15 million in 2018. Among other drastic consequences, these cuts will force UNRWA to close 275 schools, leaving a quarter of a million children and youth without classes to attend after summer break – a lethal incubator of anger and violence within Gaza, and a potentially overwhelming security risk to Israel.

Third, restrictions on border crossings into Israel need to be eased. Workers from Gaza can no longer cross the border to work, shortchanging both Gaza and Israel. Also, because there are no CT scanners, MRI machines, or radiation machines in Gaza, patients who have cancer – and especially women with breast cancer – must travel to Ramallah. However, many of these patients are denied permits to travel. People with serious illnesses should not be sentenced to death in the name of Israeli security.

In moral terms, I concluded in my commentary, those who can help avert the looming humanitarian crisis in Gaza should help – turn on the power, write the check, ease the border. Three powerful men – America’s Donald Trump, Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu and Egypt’s Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – could make a profound difference, and

thereby set the peace process on a different course. There's still time for them to avert another catastrophe.

The responses I have received thus far to my commentary, both from members and friends of All Souls, as well as other people from across the nation and around the world, have covered a wide gamut. I have heard from Palestinians who fled their homeland in 1948 during the war that led to the creation of the modern state of Israel, and I have heard from Jews who believe Palestine rightly belongs to the Jews because God gave it to them long ago.

With a few notable exceptions, most of the responses have been about what I didn't say rather than what I did. Why didn't the Palestinians accept the UN partition proposal in 1947? Isn't it true that some of the Palestinians who fled in 1948 did so willingly? Aren't the problems in Gaza the result of conflict between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority? Are you saying the reports of Palestinians sending their children to the protests are fake news? Why are you talking about politics from the pulpit? And so on.

In light of these and other historical complexities, of which I am keenly aware, how can I be of use? Here's how: by distinguishing, within a moral framework, the political issues from the humanitarian issues. The political issues have been a long time in the making — 70 years or 4,000 years, depending on how you count — and, in my view at least, they are going to take a long time to resolve. In the meantime, the humanitarian issues, while they have been caused by the political impasse, should not be held hostage until the politics get sorted out. Fourth-graders should not be denied an education even if their parents voted for Hamas. Sewage pumps should not be shut down even if a Palestinian teenager threw a rock at an Israeli soldier.

After all, if a child is injured in an auto accident, we don't deprive her of medical care even if her father was driving drunk. Indeed, we don't deprive the drunk driver of medical care. We attend to their wounds and sort out the culpability later.

The people of Gaza are wounded, and their wounds need tending to — no matter who is responsible. Make no mistake, in any situation of conflict, those with disproportionate power — whether political, economic, or military — also bear a disproportionate responsibility for resolving the situation in a way that safeguards the human dignity and human rights of everyone without exception. On these terms, the United States and Israel bear a disproportionate responsibility not only to resolve the political impasse over the long term, but also to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the short term.

In the face of a different crisis some years ago, the political philosopher Michael Walzer wrote, "We are instant spectators of every atrocity; we sit in our living rooms and see the murdered children, the desperate refugees. Perhaps horrific crimes are still committed in dark places, but not many; contemporary horrors are well-lit. And so a question is posed that has never been posed before — at least never with such immediacy, never so inescapably: What is our responsibility? What should we do?"

Walzer answers his own question by saying, “In situations like these, anyone who can help should help.”

I agree. When the values that make us civilized are at risk, good people do not stand by and do nothing. If someone’s in distress, and we can help, then we should help.

There’s a scene in the movie *The Constant Gardner* that remains etched in my mind. The story concerns a brash investigative journalist named Tessa Quayle, who is married to Justin Quayle, a cool and cautious British diplomat based in Nairobi. Midway through the movie, Tessa is lying in an overheated hospital room after losing her son during childbirth. Because Tessa has insisted on going to a hospital that serves local people, not one reserved for Europeans, she finds herself next to a Kenyan woman who has just given birth. The mother subsequently dies, however, so Tessa nurses the infant herself.

Sometime later, as Justin drives Tessa away from the hospital, they pass the Kenyan infant being carried back home by her grandmother, who is walking down the road, accompanied by a young boy.

“We must give them a ride,” Tessa says to Justin.

“We can’t, Tess. I must take you home,” Justin replies.

“But their village is forty kilometers away,” Tessa responds, “and they have no money for a bus. They’ll never make it.”

“I’m sorry, Tessa,” Justin replies, “but I must put you first. After all, there are millions of Africans who need help. We can’t save them all.”

“No,” Tessa replies, “but we can save these three.”

Whenever you find yourself in a situation where someone is suffering, no matter the reason, ask yourself, “How can I be of use?” You and I may not be able to alleviate the suffering in Gaza, or Syria, or Yemen, or in other far-flung places where suffering abounds. But we inevitably find ourselves in places where we can make a difference.

When that happens, if we can help, we should help. We can’t save everyone, but we can save one — or maybe three. Like Bonhoeffer, we can be of use.