



A Room Full of Friends: Those Who Sacrificed Greatly for their Faith

Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; July 13, 2025

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 26:1-8; Luke 9:23-27

This morning, we continue our summer sermon series, *A Room Full of Friends*, in which I share favorite authors who have become dear friends. Today, we focus on those who have made great sacrifices for their faith. One such person is Corrie Ten Boom. Born in 1892, Corrie came from a Dutch Reformed family who owned a jewelry store in Amsterdam's Jewish quarter. At 48, she lived with her sister and father and worked as a watchmaker in the family shop started by her grandfather.

Corrie's involvement with the Dutch underground began by giving temporary shelter to her Jewish neighbors who were being driven out of their homes. She found places for them to stay in the countryside. Soon word spread and more arrived seeking shelter. In time, Corrie constructed a false wall in her bedroom so she could hide people behind it. After a year and a half, her home developed into the center of an underground ring that reached throughout Holland. But on February 28, 1944, a Nazi informant came seeking help. Before the end of the day, her home was raided, and she and her family were arrested.

Corrie's father died within 10 days from an illness, but Corrie and her older sister, Betsie, remained in a series of prisons and concentration camps, first in Holland and then in Germany. In later writings, Corrie explains how she struggled with and overcame the hate that she had for the man

who betrayed her family and how she and Betsie gave comfort to other inmates. She describes a typical evening in which they would use their secreted Bible to hold worship services. She writes,

At first Betsie and I called these meetings with great timidity. But as night after night went by and no guard ever came near us, we grew bolder. A single meeting night might include a recital of the Magnificat in Latin by a group of Roman Catholics, a whispered hymn by some Lutherans, and a chant by Eastern Orthodox women. With each moment the crowd around us would swell, packing the nearby platforms, hanging over the edges, until the high structures groaned and swayed. At last, either Betsie or I would open the Bible. Because only the Hollanders could understand the Dutch text we would translate aloud in German. And then we would hear the life-giving words passed back along the aisles in French, Polish, Russian, Czech, and back into Dutch. They were little previews of heaven, these evenings beneath the light bulb.

Betsie, never strong in health, grew steadily weaker and died in December. Some of her last words to Corrie were, "We must tell them what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here."

Due to a clerical error, Corrie was released from Ravensbruck one week before all women her age were killed. When the war ended, she made her way back to Haarlem, and tried to resume her life, but found her heart wasn't in it. Instead, she had a burning desire to travel and tell her family's story. In time, she documented the story in such books as *The Hiding Place* and *Tramp for the Lord*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, son of a Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Berlin, was born in 1906. He was an outstanding student and gifted pianist. Although his family expected he would have a career in music, at the age of 14, he announced his desire to become a minister and theologian. They were less than pleased. By the age of 25 he was a lecturer in systematic theology. In time he became a leading spokesman for the Confessing Church, the center of Protestant resistance to the Nazis. He organized and for a time led the underground seminary of the Confessing Church. His book *Life Together* describes the life of the Christian community in that seminary, and his book *The Cost of Discipleship* attacks what he calls "cheap grace," which he defines as "grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

After a time of deep prayer, Bonhoeffer joined his brother-in-law and a few others to plan the overthrow of Hitler in 1939. Though their plan failed, in April of 1943, two men arrived in a black Mercedes, put Bonhoeffer in the car, and drove away. He spent two years in prison, corresponding with family and friends, pastoring fellow prisoners, and reflecting on the meaning

of "Jesus Christ for today." On April 8, 1945, Bonhoeffer had just finished conducting a service of worship when two soldiers came in, saying, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, make ready and come with us." It was the standard summons to a condemned prisoner. As he left, he said to another prisoner, "This is the end—but for me, the beginning—of life." He was hanged the next day, less than one week before the Allies arrived.

Immaculee Ilibagiza wrote *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. In it she shares her story about the Rwandan genocide that erupted with a savagery that shocked the world. In just 100 days, an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 Tutsis were killed.

In early spring 1994, Immaculée was home from university when tensions with the Hutu majority escalated. At dinner, her brother urged their father—a respected Catholic school administrator—to move the family to safety. Confident from surviving past conflicts, he believed order would return. But the next day, a plane carrying Rwanda's Hutu president was shot down, triggering a swift and brutal genocide against the Tutsi people. Government ministers openly threatened Tutsis on state radio, and hundreds soon gathered at Immaculée's home seeking her father's guidance. Despite his pleas, local authorities offered no help, and her family scattered. Her father arranged for her to hide in a small bathroom in the home of an Episcopal priest, where she joined seven other young women. What was meant to be temporary shelter became their refuge for the next three months.

Repeatedly, Hutu gangs came to search the house, but they never attempted to enter the bathroom. Gripped by terror, Immaculée turned to God, praying constantly as she clutched her father's red rosary. In her desperation, she made a promise: if her life was spared, she would not seek revenge. One night, she had a powerful dream—Jesus appeared to her, gently delivering the news that her family had not survived, but assuring her that, come what may, she could trust him.

On July 7, 1994, after most of the killing had ended, Immaculee and the other women emerged from their hiding place. Just as she feared—her family was gone. Only one brother survived because he happened to be out of the country. So much horror. So much hatred. So much loss. Still, Immaculee displayed no bitterness at the events that claimed most of her family. Instead, she chose to forgive, not to excuse the violence, but to free her heart from hatred. Through deep prayer and reflection, she came to believe that forgiveness is essential for healing and that love, not vengeance, was the path God intended for her.

Such horrible things have happened down through the ages—often in the name of God—often expressed through acts of hatred toward the "other"—toward anyone who is somehow different. Consider Jesus, God's beloved Son. He walked the dusty roads of Palestine listening to people's stories and responding with compassion and mercy. Many people became angry with him

because he was kind and good to the “wrong people.” It was one of the reasons they killed him. Their worldview was threatened because Jesus offered a different vision for God’s kin-dom breaking in—one which valued love over hate, serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting, and peace over violence.

Ultimately, Jesus modeled for his followers—for us—how to live in relationship—with compassion and a commitment to build bridges where walls once stood. In a world still divided by fear and hatred, we are in desperate need of bridge-builders. Which leaves us with some important questions to ponder: Will we dare to see others as Jesus sees us? Will we open our hearts to the beautiful, sacred diversity of God’s creation? Will we choose to love, not only when it’s easy, but also when it’s costly? As those baptized into Christ’s body, we are citizens of a kin-dom where love of neighbor is not an option—it is a calling. So, let us make every effort to live our calling with courage, with grace, and with unshakable hope. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Cover image “God Sighting” by Martha Sanders