
Living every day as if it were your last.

PERSPECTIVE

Earl Palmer

I've been rereading the books and letters of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in preparation for a class I'm teaching on his life journey and his convictions about the meaning of life. One paragraph he wrote in 1943 especially challenges our generation:

It is true that there is a silly, cowardly kind of optimism, which we must condemn. But the optimism that is the will for the future should never be despised, even if it is proved wrong a hundred times; it is health and vitality, and the sick man has no business to impugn it.

With those words Bonhoeffer took on the cynical pessimism that trapped so many of the people he knew.

I am especially intrigued by his phrase describing the optimism he advocates: The "will for the future" that is "health and vitality." No one should ever despise a healthy will for the future. "It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow," he concludes. "In that case, we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before."

This young pastor, even in his fatal imprisonment, was gripped by the gospel of Jesus Christ; and when people experience the love of Christ, the first change in themselves they notice is this healthy will for the future. We who know of the powerful love of

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Christ know that Jesus the Lord can forgive human sins and resolve even the most complicated of human crises. Beginning with our own repentance and discovery of grace, therefore, we start investing our lives in making a difference in the world. Though we may invest ourselves in people's lives on a small scale, the person-to-person difference we make is part of the healthy optimism that forms, in total, a model of hope. The process is how cultures and civilizations are changed for the better.

I have observed that it is not the people who major in telling how bad everything and everyone is who make a difference for hope, though they may intensify our awareness of the crises. The ones who change the

world for good are those who have a healthy will for the future and who have found some concrete and personal way to invest in people for that future because of love.

What a time to be alive! We have the chance to create real differences. When those changes are added together, they make all of the survivalists with their hoards of gold and secret collections of assault weapons look foolish. Survivalists wager on

despair, not knowing that we live on the side of Good Friday and Easter. They joined up with the illness, not with the health.

For me, Bonhoeffer summed up this idea of the healthy will for the future in a phrase from a letter he wrote from prison: "I want to live every day as if it were my last and every day as if there were a great future." ♦



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