We have a new series title WhyChristian? Featuring stories of people who have found a genuine faith despite profound disillusionment with religion per se, maybe especially the current state of the Christian religion.

For starters today, Caroline is going to tell her story and then I’m going to lay groundwork for series by telling the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a great theologian who called for a new “religionless Christianity.” But first, Caroline’s story.

Bonhoeffer was German theologian who opposed Third Reich and paid for it with his life (hung in Gestapo camp 5 days before camp liberated.)

In prison wrote letters—mostly to friend Eberhard Bethge (bet-ge) In these letters, he proposed we are struggling into a new form of faith he called “Religionless Christianity”

How did he come to propose such a thing?

Bonhoeffer not raised in a devout home: his father was famous psychiatrist and psychiatry at time saw religion as leftover pathology from an archaic past. B was Super-smart kid and inexplicably decided to study theology. By 21 had his doctorate and big theologian of time, Karl Barth called it brilliant.

Privileged kid living off his parents’ dime, loved to shop for clothes but Nazis coming to power. Bonhoeffer spent a year in NYC at a Union Theological in 1931. Christianity he saw there turned him off. But he went to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem led by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell
Sr.—a black church—and he saw a form of faith he knew was real. Realized God identified with vulnerable—those under thumb of the powerful and that he had to go back to Germany and fight for a faith that would resist Hitler.

Which he did and devotion deepened. Wrote *Cost of Discipleship* in 1937. German title, *nachfolge*—follower as in act of following Jesus: direct challenge to Hitler who by then had a massive following; term Fuhrer meant leader-guide.

Founded underground seminary to build resistance to Hitler in church. But it was too late. By then, German churches had all been co-opted by Third Reich. Hitler wooed German Christians with appeals to morality including “moral purity” and the epic battle between good and evil. Noting this appeal, scholar of religion Jeffery Pugh describes the German church at this time as filled with “great protests against secularism and godlessness, against Catholicism, disbelief, and immorality.”

By 1939, even 85% of pastors of so-called “Confessing Church” (formed in resistance to Hitler) signed loyalty pledge to Hitler. Bonhoeffer, who leaned pacifist, joined a conspiracy to take out Hitler and was found out thrown into prison.

Germany was center of Protestant Reformation—if U.S. today is know as a stronghold of Christianity, Germany in 1930 held a greater claim to title. That a smart kid not form a church going home would decide to study theology, write his dissertation on church gives idea. The Christian Religion was a miserable failure in Germany. Can imagine Bonhoeffer’s disillusionment with religion.
As I think Emily mention, Bonhoeffer had another very personal reason to see how religion work against what it purports to advance: love & mercy. Recent scholarship, using newly sources indicates Bonhoeffer may have been gay. I new biography by Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory*. Trust me, Bonhoeffer was gay.

At the worst possible time to be gay in Germany. Remember in 1980s how the pink triangle was a sign of gay rights? That came from arm-band that gay prisoners in death camps forced to wear.

I saw movie *Spotlight* about priest pedophilia cover up in Boston. Thousands of kids molested over several decades—huge cover up, uncovered by investigative reporting of Boston Globe. I knew son of lead reporter played by Batman, who pursued and broke the story. At very end, they play “up-to-date-facts”, including that the Cardinal Law kept the cover up going for years, had a cushy job today in the Vatican. I was so mad I sat through entire credits wondering if I would walk out of that theater as an atheist.

How did Bonhoeffer keep and deepen his Jesus faith to the end despite his profound disillusionment with the Christian religion?

Two factors: 1. Because in Harlem Church led by Adam Clayton Powell Sr., he got a taste of real thing. He met the Jesus who hangs out with marginalized—as God of Hebrew Bible (Bible of Jesus) did

Last Sunday, came to church so distressed over Charlottesville, President’s response, and cowardice of so many Christian leaders to rebuke him. Andy Deeb as speaking. Andy who was kicked out of one Christian college for being trans (after being assured he was welcome as a trans person) and then kicked out of his own church (after being assured he was welcome). Andy giving his first sermon as a seminary student. During reflection time
Andy used a psalm of complaint which gave me permission to vent with God a little. “I don’t know about you God but I believe in Andy.” and then I realized God did too and I was, “OK then, fine I believe in you too but just so you know, I’m feeling it more for Andy right now.”

It’s the witness of people who find faith overcoming great obstacles that moves me and keeps me following.

I also picture Bonhoeffer reading and re-reading his Bible—not renouncing his faith even though he had it with religion.

**A deep reading of the Bible, not a superficial reading reveals a religious text that is highly critical of religion.** Easy to be critical of other religions, but Bible, written by Israel is critical of core concepts of its *own* religious practices. Like sacrifice.

One practice common all major religions (at least in founding documents) is **sacrifice**. Here’s the thing: the Bible moves from promoting sacrifice, to questioning sacrifice, to denouncing it.

Ambivalence over sacrifice appears early on. First two major depictions connect sacrifice with murder. Cain-Able story does this. They start out offering sacrifice, then Cain murders Abel. The Abraham-Isaac story does same thing. Weird story. Abraham’s willingness to kill Isaac (we would see it as murder) is predicated on the legitimacy of sacrifice. God seems to command it but in the end, forbids it, or deflects it to animal sacrifice. There it is again—Bible connects sacrifice with murder. Whereas religion is about justifying murder under the guise of sacrifice.
First it appears as something humans do. Before it is commanded, people are just doing it. Then it is regulated by God, which involves commands about how to do it. Things like: animals, not people, you idiots. This phase goes on for a long time—elaborate sacrifices prescribed. Then sacrifice is questioned by Prophets. When Isaiah arrives, God says: “I don’t want your stinking sacrifices. I require mercy, not sacrifice.” Jesus—during the temple period, sides with Isaiah over the temple priests, saying go see what this means: I require mercy, not sacrifice. Rabbinic Judaism did the same.

Humans are addicted to sacrifice and in Bible God is a doctor treating a patient who physically-emotionally can’t go cold turkey. The doctor supervises less dangerous substitutes (like Methadone for a heroin addict)—sometimes a long weaning process. Some people never get off methadone, but they don’t OD on heroin.

Some anthropologists think first sacrifices were human and they were perpetuated because the murders (never called that, always called sacrifice) brought peace to a group embroiled in internal rivalries gone viral. We now call that mechanism, with the help of the Bible, scapegoating.

Communities suffering internal conflict, turn on innocent victims thought to be guilty—remember Lock her up, Lock her up?, that’s a crowd on the verge of becoming a scapegoating mob. When they succeed in venting their violence on a scapegoat get a temporary peace. And the cycle repeats.

Bonhoeffer gave his life resisting the biggest scapegoating event in human history. A religionless Christianity is one that renounces what has been called “sacred violence.” Something the Bible itself points to.
Sacred violence isn’t just killing people, locking them up, or using animal substitutes. There’s a trickle-down effect of this thinking. Any religious justification for harming others but calling it things like “upholding Godly standards’ is in truth sacrificial thinking—a form of sacred violence, rooted ultimately in the need to murder in order to keep the peace.

It’s also standing by silently—not objecting—in order to keep the peace with your group. Let the harm to the vulnerable go unchecked so our group can hang together. These evangelical advisors to the President keeping silent while the President makes a moral equivalence between Nazis and protestors protesting Nazis. That’s what they are doing: keeping the peace in their constituent groups. Hey! You’re advisors, advise! But no.

One of my pastor heroes, Eugene Peterson, disappointed me deeply. He’s my better, and yet. I’d heard he was changing his mind on LGBTQ, preparing to come out in favor of full quality. Then he makes his coming out statement public and the Evangelical Machine punishes him severely—major Christian bookstore chains pulls all his books. Next day, he retracts it, I didn’t mean it. He did mean it, but in the end he chose keeping the peace with his group even if it meant being silent while vulnerable people suffer harm in the name of “upholding Godly standards” Really good people do this, not just bad actors.

That’s the religion behind Bonhoeffer’s call for a religionless Christianity.

What we are doing in this church is worth doing and it needs doing. People need places to see that kind of faith emerging. Bonhoeffer needed that
Harlem church. He wouldn’t be the Bonhoeffer we know without them. (Emily at Haven, Berkely)

The reason I got up from watching that movie Spotlight in 2015 still believing in God despite my anger at the church, is that it was 2015 and we were just getting started. And most every week we heard someone’s story—and many were stories of people sorting through the chaff of religion to find the wheat of God.

I wasn’t coming to church so much to teach anyone about God as I was coming—and still come, to nurture my faith in God, inspired by your struggles to walk out with others what Bonhoeffer said is time to emerge.