**Spiritual Guides: Dorothee Soelle**

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**NPMC – July 11, 2021**

*Scripture: Amos 5:21-24, Luke 10:38-42*

*Hymns: Voices Together 790 - How Can We Be Silent (also StJ 61), VT 527 - Bless the Arms that Comfort, VT 547 - How Clear Is Our Vocation (also HWB 541)*

Amos 5:21-24:

21“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;  
    your assemblies are a stench to me.  
22Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
    I will not accept them.  
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
    I will have no regard for them.  
23Away with the noise of your songs!  
    I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
24But let justice roll on like a river,  
    righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Luke 10:38-42:

38Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. 40But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” 41But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

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Now that I’ve been preaching at NPMC for a while, you’ve probably heard me mention one of my favourite theologians, Dorothee Soelle, in my sermons from time to time. She was a remarkable person who is remembered as a poet, a theologian and teacher, a peace activist, a mother, a mystic. She is someone who has influenced my own faith, especially with her spirituality that knits together contemplation and action into a very practical, embodied, lived faith. This is something that resonates deeply with my Anabaptist-Mennonite approach to faith and life.

Soelle was born in Cologne, Germany in 1929, and her experience growing up in Nazi Germany shaped her life and theology in profound ways. Her parents were well-educated and privately opposed the Nazi regime, but warned her to stay quiet about this. In 1943, her family hid a Jewish woman in their attic for six weeks, which greatly impacted Soelle. This experience brought home for her the threat posed by the Nazis, and she speaks of her childhood ending with this experience. The next year, their family home was firebombed, and she remembers experiencing hunger and cold during this time. But she also continued going to school, which was a haven for her from the harsh realities of wartime Germany.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Given the difficult circumstances of her childhood and adolescence, Soelle held somewhat of a critical stance toward Christianity. She became known alongside fellow German theologians Johann Baptist Metz and Juergen Moltmann, as those attempting to do theology “after Auschwitz.” They had seen the horrors of the Nazi genocide and had witnessed the deafening silence of many of the German churches in the face of it. Convinced that the former answers to theological questions of God’s control over history or God’s relationship to human suffering were no longer adequate, Soelle set out to find new answers. Her most well-read books – *Suffering*, *Theology for Skeptics*, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* – reflect this kind of faith that wrestles with difficult questions raised by contemporary issues and events.

Part of Soelle’s answer to how to do theology “after Auschwitz” was very much in the spirit of the Amos 5 passage we heard today:

I hate, I despise your religious festivals;  
    your assemblies are a stench to me.  
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
    I will not accept them.  
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
    I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs!  
    I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
But let justice roll on like a river,  
    righteousness like a never-failing stream!

In this passage, God finds worship without the work of justice to be unacceptable, even hypocritical. Likewise, Soelle insisted that just because something is labelled religious doesn’t mean it’s necessarily faithful to Jesus. When the majority of the German churches stood by in silence in the face of Nazi crimes, they were in fact betraying their “own truth.” She writes, “In biblical image, the church is often like Judas, who delivered Christ to the established religious authorities. […Other times,] the church is like Peter, who denied that he had ever known anything at all about peace and justice.”[[2]](#footnote-2) When the church betrays its own calling and purpose in this way, its rituals and ceremonies become empty, like in the Amos passage. Faith becomes hollow when it is not accompanied by action for justice and peace, when it is not lived out in the love of neighbour and of creation. For Soelle, faith is not only private and individual, but has implications for how we live together, for our communities and the socio-political arena. Soelle did not give up on the church, but did call it to more clearly and courageously embody its calling, so that “justice would roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!”

Along these lines, Soelle and a group of others began to organize “Political Evensong” services in Cologne in the late 1960s. At this time, Soelle was a divorced mother of three who was working as a high school teacher and a writer for radio programs. Her group began these ecumenical evening prayer services as a way to “put into practice the statement that faith and politics are inseparable.” They integrated liturgy, Scripture reading, and calls for action directed at peace issues of the time, such as speaking out against the Vietnam war, advocating prison reform, or the equal rights of women.[[3]](#footnote-3) Here is an excerpt from one of the prayers Soelle wrote for these services. It’s in the form of a confession of faith, and is entitled “Credo” (I believe):

I believe in Jesus Christ

who was right when he

“as an individual who can’t do anything”

just like us

worked to alter every condition

and came to grief in so doing. […]

I believe in Jesus Christ

who is resurrected into our life

so that we shall be free

from prejudice and presumptuousness,

from fear and hate

and push his revolution onward

and toward his reign.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It was through organizing these “Political Evensong” services that Soelle met Fulbert Steffensky, a former Benedictine priest. They were married in 1969, and a year later, their daughter was born, Soelle’s fourth child. Soelle was also studying philosophy at this time, and when she went in for her oral defence to complete her PhD, she came up against discrimination herself. The fact that Soelle had had a baby a few months earlier was apparently considered “inappropriate conduct for an academic” by the professors and administration of her university![[5]](#footnote-5) She was failed and had to re-take her exam. After passing and earning her degree, however, Soelle was unable to find an academic position in Germany, perhaps in part because of her outspokenness on peace and justice issues. But there was a place that welcomed her precisely for her peace theology and her creativity: Union Theological Seminary in New York hired her in 1975 and she worked there as a beloved professor for twelve years.

It was at Union that Soelle became more aware of other theologies centred on peace and social justice: she met Black theologians working for racial equity; feminist, womanist, and queer theologians, working for women’s experiences and the experiences of sexual minorities to be reflected and included in our worship and practice of faith; she encountered Indigenous spiritualities, reflecting a deep connection to creation and community. This often led her to some really interesting and creative re-readings of more familiar biblical passages, as she brought them into conversation with contemporary issues, in an effort to find the gospel – the good news for us – within these stories.

One of these is the passage about Jesus’ visit to Bethany, to the home of his friends, Mary and Martha. Soelle speaks about how, growing up, this story was interpreted as a lesson about the relationship between “contemplation” (what we call spirituality or worship) and “action” (one’s relationships and lived faith practices in daily life). Soelle writes,

The Western tradition has seen these two women as prototypes of the contemplative and the active life. But meditation and efficiency, the quiet hearing of the Word and the restless concern for the daily needs of the body … were not simply contrasted with one another. They were placed in an order of rank derived more from Aristotle [and Greek philosophy] than from Jewish thought. The contemplative life was the higher, more spiritual, and more essential; the active, practical life is necessary but inferior. Mary has ‘chosen the better part (10:42).’[[6]](#footnote-6)

But Soelle sees in this a disturbing hierarchy that devalues “Martha, the active, realistic woman” in favour of Mary, seen as an idealized figure of disembodied spirituality, in the image of cloistered sisters who withdrew from the world.

Against this hierarchy and dualism, Soelle reinterprets the story of Mary and Martha. She writes, “We have to learn that we need not choose between contemplation and action. … We need not divide the world into doers and dreamers, into gentle, listening, self-surrendering Marys on the one side and pragmatic, busy Marthas on the other. We need both Mary and Martha, for in fact we ourselves are both sisters.” And then she quotes medieval mystic Teresa of Avila, who said, “‘Believe me, Martha and Mary must be together in order to give lodging to the Lord and have him always with them. Otherwise he would be badly served and remain unfed. How could Mary, who was always sitting at his feet, have given him anything to eat if her sister had not come to help her?’ It is only the two sisters together who can ‘give lodging to’ Christ so that he has a place in the world.”

In holding Mary and Martha together in this way, Soelle transforms how we look at both “contemplation” and “action.” In one of her last books, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, she talks about what she’s doing as “democratizing mysticism.” That is, she’s taking the tradition of mysticism – which emphasizes faith not primarily as obedience to God, but as an encounter with God, as a relationship of being united with God – and making it accessible to everyone, not just monks or nuns or “contemplative” types hidden away in monasteries. One doesn’t need to be a spiritual “expert” in order to relate to God in this close and loving way. God is available to all of us in this way, as reflected in her first chapter title: “We Are All Mystics.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

But she’s also claiming that this relationship of union with the divine affects how we live in the world, and shapes our actions. Mysticism, done right, is the spirituality that enables us to work for social justice and peace, that nourishes and sustains the work of trying to make the world a better place, to usher in God’s reign. In knitting contemplation and action together, in keeping Mary and Martha together, Soelle is therefore also holding together ethics and religion. “If it is true that God is love,” she says, “then the separation of religion and ethics is dangerous, as well as detrimental to both sides.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Religion doesn’t call us to turn our backs on the world, but to serve our neighbours and care for creation: to put love into practice. “Real contemplation gives rise to just actions,” says Soelle. And she also quotes another medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, who said, “What we have gathered in contemplation we give out in love.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

After retiring from Union Theological Seminary in 1987, Soelle continued teaching shorter terms at various universities, travelling to speak and take part in the peace movement, and writing and publishing extensively. Her final book was fittingly called, *The Mystery of Death*. She passed away in 2003 from a heart attack at the age of 73, the night after giving a talk about “God and Felicity” (God and Joy).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Dorothee Soelle herself may be gone, but she has left behind many, many books full of her poetic words and compelling reflections on faith and action. I find myself returning again and again to her words, and finding new meaning and challenge and encouragement in them. As both a theologian and activist, her example reminds me not to settle for easy answers or for the former answers that no longer fit our time and place. Rooted deeply in the love of God, we really can creatively and courageously embody the peace and justice that Jesus taught and lived. Thanks be to God for this member of our cloud of witnesses. AMEN

Hymn –

Ben – StS 153

1. Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of A Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 3, 12, 9, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Against the Wind*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Against the Wind*, 37-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Against the Wind*, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Against the Wind*, 68, and Sarah K. Pinnock, ed., “Introduction,” in *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dorothee Soelle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Fortress Press, 1990), 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 11, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Silent Cry, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Silent Cry, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Pinnock, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)