

# In adversity: The difficult decisions of responsible love

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

In Elisabeth Sifton's *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*, the author describes how Reinhold Niebuhr, her father, moved away from the pacifism that prevailed among mainline religious leaders in the years after World War I. Niebuhr in New York and Paul Tillich in Germany both saw in the rise of Hitler's National Socialism an evil so palpable that Christian morality demanded that it be opposed forcefully.

Sifton is critical of Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the *Christian Century* at the time, for coming too slowly to Niebuhr's position. Tillich's opposition to Nazism cost him his teaching post in Germany in 1933. Niebuhr arranged for Tillich to join him on the faculty of Union Seminary. A few years later, one of Niebuhr's students at Union, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would return to Germany, and gradually move to the Niebuhrian conclusion that the evil of Nazism should be opposed on Christian ethical grounds. He paid with his life.

Sifton is also sharply critical of the churches in Germany and in the U.S. that were thunderously silent about the threat of totalitarianism and about the economic and social injustices that provided its fertile breeding ground. Political engagement was rare and frowned upon by most religious leaders in both nations.

Sifton reflects: "In adversity, a glaring beam of ethical consequence lights the moment when one chooses action or inaction, and it throws dark shadows. . . . To take no position at such a moment [the 1930s] is to be prey to Fascism."

Every year as Palm Sunday approaches I think about Bonhoeffer's decision to return to Germany from the safety of New York City. William Stringfellow once said that Christians go to church on Palm Sunday because they love a parade. True enough. At the church I serve we parade all the children down the center aisle waving palm branches while the congregation sings "All Glory, Laud and Honor." It's wonderful, as I suppose the first Palm Sunday parade was monumentally wonderful. But above all

the day reminds us about how Jesus made a difficult decision to act, to come to Jerusalem instead of remaining in the relative security of Galilee.

In *Justice and Mercy*, a collection of essays published after his death, Niebuhr speaks to this Palm Sunday: "When we talk about love we have to become mature or we will become sentimental. Basically love means . . . being responsible, responsibility to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind."

At this season of the church year, we look on with wonder as a man makes a difficult and risky decision out of his love for God, his friends, his nation, his religion. We look on with wonder because of the sense that we are all called, in his name, to love and live that passionately, making the difficult decisions that responsible love necessitates.