

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
The Reverend John H. Brock

April 20, 2008  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16;  
1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Grace and Peace to you from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

There's a theology that I have heard that is a really simple, fairly convincing, theology. I have heard high school students spout it, I heard adults say it, and in many respects it does really make a lot of sense. It is, very simply: "It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you really believe it." Which when you first hear it, seems to be very much in favor of something that I advocate, which is religious tolerance.

Now I know that too many atrocities and abominations, too much violence and bloodshed, has been committed in the name of religion. September 11, of course, springs to mind, and the accompanying Al Qaida jihad. But so, too, I would say are Salem witch trials of the late 1600s. Any of the Crusades would fit into that, as well as the Ottoman empires' response to that with Suliman's invasion of Europe in the early 1500s. Just about any of the "ethnic cleansing" that we have heard of lately such as what is going on in Darfur. Or how about Bosnia in the 1990s? Germany in the 1930s and 1940s? Or western North America in the 1800s? All of this religious warfare being perpetrated in the name of God. "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as really believe it."

I don't know, would you really be able to say that to Stephen? Admittedly, unless you happen to know what happened in the two preceding chapters, that little snippet that we got in our first lesson this morning doesn't make a whole lot of sense. All we know is that some guy named Stephen got stoned to death, while another guy named Saul played coat check. What we really need to do is go backwards. Do you remember the reading from Acts last week? All of the believers had gotten together, sold what they had, and they put it all in a common back account. Right? So that they were able to share everything. What was happening, though, was that there were two basic groups of believers. There were Greek speaking believers and there were Hebrew speaking believers. What was happening was that the Hebrew speaking believers were the ones who were in charge of the distribution. They were saying that of course we are all created equal, but some of us are more equal than others. The ones who are **more** equal were the Hebrew speaking so the Greek speaking believers weren't getting an equal share of things.

What happened, as in biblical tradition, the twelve, the disciples (this is still happening in Jerusalem, this is still very early on in Christianity) the twelve got together and they say 'we don't really want to be bothered with all this trouble, so we're going to appoint some people to be in charge of the distribution.' They appointed seven people, of whom Stephen was in charge. The reason that they chose him, as it says in Acts 6:5, Stephen was a "man full of faith and the Holy Spirit." But of course there were those who were jealous of Stephen and they instigated against him. Stephen is brought up on charges of blasphemy and he is brought before a council where he is asked if these charges are true. (Charges of blasphemy and going before the council – does that sound at all familiar?)

Stephen is standing there before the council, and he responds with this wonderful story of faith, which is found in Acts, Chapter 7. So why don't we all grab our Bibles and open up to Acts chapter 7. Stephen starts off with this wonderful discussion of what faith is. He starts off talking about how God appears to Abraham and how God made the promise to Abram and Sari when they were living in the land of Er. God continued to be with Abram and Sari as they traveled and when they eventually settle down their names are changed to Abraham and Sarah. They have a covenant and out of that covenant, "I will be your God, and you will be my people," Abraham and Sarah get Isaac, Isaac conceives and has Jacob, Jacob, of course, has his son Joseph, Joseph settles down in Egypt, and it is there in Egypt that the people settle and they grow and grow in numbers. There comes a time when they are indeed fulfilling that covenant and their numbers almost seem to out number the stars in the sky. But then Pharaoh starts to become worried.

So the people of Israel leave the land of Egypt and they go to that second part of the covenant, of the promise that God has given them, that "I will give to you a land that you may call your own." They go there and begin to settle down and worship God. While Stephen is saying all this, he is really digging it into the religious leaders of the day. The religious ones who are very focused in following the law. Every little tidbit of the law. They are not all that concerned about faith; they're not all that concerned with their spiritual development. They are **very** concerned with following the law. Finally in Acts 7:51-53, Stephen says to them: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

As you might imagine, that did not go over well with those stiff-necked people, and they are the ones who rise up and shout 'he's always talking blasphemy. He's got to be killed!' so they drag him over to the edge of town, and as they are stoning him, and he's fallen down to the ground, he looks up to heaven and he says, "It doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you really believe it." No, his faith is fundamental to who he is. It did really, really matter to Stephen as to what he believed.

In our Second Reading, our reading from Peter, we are reminded that we need to have a good foundation on which to build our belief — a solid foundation for a good, solid faith. A faith that is nourished in its youth, and continually fed as it matures. We had some wonderful food imagery in our second lesson, didn't we? An imagery of milk and meat. To yearn for milk, not because it's the easy stuff to digest; to yearn for milk that builds up your faith, the way a newborn yearns for milk from its mother. The milk that fills and makes them strong. To yearn, to desire, for God to be so active in your life. To be feeding you and nourishing you in your faith, not in things that **we** think are important. God goes so far as to tell us that we, in our faith, by the waters of our baptism, we are called. If you listen to verses 9 and 10: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into the marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

We are chosen; we are called; we are set apart by God. I love the King James Version of this. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a *peculiar* people.”) But we are a peculiar people when we live a faithful life. Can we honestly say it doesn’t matter what you believe, so long as you really mean it?

Jesus felt it really mattered what you believe. That dialog that Jesus has back and forth with Thomas and Philip - it mattered to Jesus what they believed. It mattered to Thomas and Philip what they believe. It was important to Jesus that they believe what he wants them to. Because in what Philips asks, we can almost hear it can’t we? ‘Show us the Father, and then we will believe, otherwise, what does it matter Lord?’ I can almost hear Jesus say, I can almost see the dope slap, ‘What do you mean, show us the father? Aren’t you paying attention? Don’t you look around and see before you? God the Father is here in me.’

It does matter what you believe. Because another drawback to that little bit of theology is that there are very strong, and very sincere people who believe very adamantly in the fact that they are pedophiles. They are adamant in what they believe. There are those who are dedicated and devoted serial haters, who honestly and with their whole heart believe that a human being can be inferior simply because of the color of their skin or their ethnic heritage. It **does** matter what you believe.

Both Stephen and Peter encourage us to believe in the one true God. Jesus says that God the father is that one true God. If you don’t believe, that is when God becomes “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” Those who don’t believe in God are going to trip all over the place. By not living for one thing, they will fall for any thing.

Christ does not want us to fall, but calls us as the chosen people, calls us as a royal priesthood. Christ is the one who is able to keep us from falling, to allow us to stand before the almighty God in the presence of the glory all the while rejoicing. Rejoicing in what we believe, as well as how strongly we believe it. (Jude 1:24)

Let us go forth and believe!

Amen.