

## ***A Radical Way of Life***

Second Sunday of Lent  
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Sunday, February 28, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Philippians 3:17-4:1

We've heard it so many times that some of us may actually think it is true. It is a philosophy of life, so to speak, and it goes something like "It really doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something." Ever heard that?

It's a trivialism that comes in a number of mutant forms. I've heard parents use that as the excuse for not bringing their children to church: "Oh, I don't want to force my beliefs on them. I just want them to believe in something and they must decide what that will be." I've heard that phrase used with emotions and feelings: "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." I've heard the phrase as people talk about religion and run out of things to say and then utter in frustration: "Well, it really doesn't matter what you or I believe, it just matters that we believe in something."

Let's stop right there and ask the obvious -- is that really true? Is it true that it doesn't matter what we believe, as long as we believe in something and believe it sincerely? Think of some of the advertising slogans used over the years to gain our attention. If it really doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe in something, is Coke the real thing, is it what the world needs today? Is image every thing as one camera manufacturer would want us to believe? Remember when Datsuns were Datsuns and not mutated into something else? Did you really believe that "Datsun saves?" Or, "Bayer Aspirin - it works miracles!"

Some advertising agency spent hours on those campaigns and on the catch-phrases we hear. But I've got to tell you, when the chips are down, my spirits are low, and my life needs some meaning, neither the thought of a small car with a six-speed manual transmission, nor a bubbly drink that makes me burp, nor a small white pill is going to do it for me.

Sure it matters what we believe, because our beliefs affect our actions. Those commercials were an absurd way of looking at this, so how about a serious example. A number of years ago, five religious cultists were convicted in the exorcism death of a three-year old boy, whom they were accused of beating to death in order to rid him of the devil. A 51-year old man, the self-professed minister to the religious household, the dead boy's 20-year old mother, and the minister's stepdaughter were among those convicted. The boy was found two months after he died in a sealed-off bedroom in the cult's home.

The defendants maintained they spanked rather than beat the boy, because they believed him possessed by the devil. The minister said they expected the boy to be resurrected. The child's mother testified that he died after she dropped him to the floor and he "growled" at her.

Does it matter what we believe? You bet -- and this is why the Word of God is so important to us. God's Word informs, enlightens, directs, and challenges us not only in

what we believe, but in how we live. This Word of God is a Word that challenges our mind-sets, our life-styles, our values, our worlds.

How do we, for instance, deal with Jesus' words that the meek will inherit the earth? How do we interpret his view of things when he says that the first will be last and the last first? What did he really mean when he told us to pray for our enemies? How do we justify our lifestyles in the face of his challenge to give ourselves away for the sake of others and in his name? How do we understand his call to be cross-bearers, the question we asked last week?

The Word of God is calling for a radical way of life from each of us. God calls us to live not according to the values, sentiments, or standards of this world, but to live according to a new Kingdom; and that should give us pause. God's word is a word of love, forgiveness, grace and justice -- the world's values call for competition, the strongest and the biggest survive, where justice is measured by what's fair for me, and my neighbor can go fend for him or her self; where the one with the most toys wins.

Let us spare no words and make no bones about it today -- what we are called to and commissioned into in our baptisms is a radical way of life. Instead of being swallowed up by society, the church is called to be its conscience.

St. Paul is a good example of a man who let the Word of God he knew as Jesus penetrate his entire life, so that he challenged and confronted the values and standards of his time. The second lesson for today is from his letter to the Christians at Philippi, written from a prison cell in Rome. He wrote to encourage them and to maintain contact with a congregation that he obviously had great affection for. Of all of Paul's letters, this one is the most gentle and encouraging. And these words are believed to be some of the last words written by Paul before his martyr's death.

For Paul, this is a time of summing up, a time of reflection, a time for giving sober advice. But there is no hint of melancholy, or depression or gloominess in it. It is a letter of joy, encouraging the flock to live a life that is in keeping with the Gospel.

He speaks a word of realism and warning: "many . . . live as enemies of the cross of Christ." The Philippian Christians are to be careful of these enemies: "Their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

As for the Christians at Philippi, they are to imitate the example Paul has set for them, not because Paul is so good, or perfect, but they are to imitate Paul and observe those who live as examples for them because the cross of Christ is visible as the center of their lives. Then he concludes with that wonderful word of encouragement: "stand firm in the Lord in this way." In which way? In the cross of Christ. No matter how difficult life may become, no matter how hard it is, live with the cross of Christ, the example of cross-bearing in the world, live with that model as our focus and image.

Let me ask it one more time -- does it matter what we believe? Being a Christian, being molded and shaped and guided by God's Word, means that there are times when you and I must be willing to stand up and be counted for what we believe. God has called us to a radical way of life, a committed discipleship that takes offense at any practice that puts people down, that stands in opposition to discrimination of people because of race, creed,

color, size, sex; that speaks words of reconciliation and forgiveness when a world is bent on power and might and flexing muscles; that offers a word of hope to a world that needs to hear some Good News.

You may have heard of the true story of a young man named David, who learned of that Good News in a very moving and poignant way, but it bears retelling today. Dave's mother was an alcoholic. Not only did her condition cause her to neglect her children, she also became cruel and abusive while drunk. She beat and burned Dave, and forced him to live in their cold, dark, and gritty garage. She treated him like a slave, and only fed him when he could perform his endless list of chores to her satisfaction. That didn't happen very often. It was a rare day when Dave came to school clean, or dressed in adequate clothing for the weather. And when his second-grade teacher tried to intervene on Dave's behalf, his mother chose to punish him by changing his name to "It." She never called him anything else but "It," and she forbade the other children from calling him by name.

The only thing that kept Dave from total and complete despair was the kindness of his teachers. They treated him with respect and caring. Compliments from them were, as we can only imagine, like food for his soul. At night, as he sat in that cold, dark garage, he pictured the faces of his teachers. This mental imagery gave him his only measure of comfort.

Dave remembers the day of his rescue with total clarity -- March 5, 1973. He was by now in the fifth grade. And finally, a few courageous teachers, the principle, and the school nurse acted on their convictions of love and caring and convinced the child protective services to step in and remove Dave from his home. That day, as the authorities came to take him to his new life, the whole staff of Dave's school lined up to give him a hug. As each person held him, Dave tried desperately to imprint the moment in his memory forever. He had never known love like that before.

St. Paul says we are to look for examples of living in the cross of Christ. Dave found his in that moment. And twenty years later, Dave Pelzer stood before his old teachers at Thomas Edison Elementary School to thank them for what they did, and to give them something special. It was a book, Dave's own book, titled, *A Child Called "It."* Today, Dave Pelzer is a speaker who spreads his message of caring and love to thousands of people and especially to children.

Does it matter what we believe? Ask Dave Pelzer about his mother who believed that children were to rarely be seen and never heard. Ask him about teachers who showed love and caring and gave him back his life. Ask Dave Pelzer, a little boy called "It," what it means to find love and acceptance and embrace in a cold, dark and cruel world. AMEN.