

Sunday, February 21
Second Sunday in Lent

Philippians 3:17--4:1

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.^{4:1}Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Dear Congregation:

Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Today we meditate in the sixth of the seven Habits of Jesus: Inviting.

It was said that the average Lutheran Christian invites someone to church once every 23 years. ... But, if sharing our faith and inviting others to experience the Christian community is a characteristic of Christian discipleship, wouldn't you invite others?

As his disciples, Christ has given each of us, a mission assignment to invite all people of every nation to be baptized in the Triune name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The followers of Jesus have always understood this as Christ's great commission to baptize and make disciples. As Christians we are instructed to invite our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and casual acquaintances to become children in God's eternal family through baptism.¹

Christianity has always been and will be a missionary organization that expects each Christian to invite others to receive salvation from God. As Christians, as followers, we are expected to tell others how God has adopted us into his eternal family through baptism.²

We are expected to use every opportunity to invite people to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus and to grow in this relationship through discipleship.

1 Seven Habits of Jesus. P. 263

2 Idem. P. 266

The New Testament challenges us to be an evangelizing and missional community of believers that is passionate to share our faith with other people, especially the people that are not connected with a Christian community.

For this reason, we need to remember some important points that are connected with our Christian practice and analyze the reason why we do what we do as Christians.

First, being a Christian is not the same as simply attending worship services. Yes, because not only attendance to worship means to be Christian. Worship is important for a Christian identity but it is not all our Christian identity. We should not be Christians only for one hour and thirty minutes every Sunday morning.

Second, being a Christian is not the same as having a compelling testimony or confessing one of the creeds. Many people believe that if they confess the Apostle creed that will make them Christians. This is not true. To believe intellectually in the Creed and Church faith statements are important points to consider when we analyze our Christian identity, but that is not all. Christianity is not only memorizing some creeds or theological statements; these express our faith but are not all what our faith is or should be.

Third, being a Christian is not mainly about subscribing to a moral code of conduct. Christianity has the highest ethic the world has ever known, however, the essence of being a Christian is not only to follow an ethical code of conduct. There are many people that have high ethical values and are not necessarily Christians. We should have high ethical standards but to be a Christian is not only to follow ethical standards.

Now, you are probably wondering, well, if the essence of being a Christian is not primarily about membership and attending worships, or not primarily about confessing a creed or a personal testimony, and not about subscribing to a moral code of conduct, then, how does one become a Christian? What does being a Christian mean?

The answer is that the essence of Christianity is Christ! And being a Christian is to be a Christ centered person.

We are Christians because Christ has entered our lives through the word and the Sacraments. A Christian is somebody who by the water and the word has begun to live the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in his or her soul. It is simple but, at the same time, very profound!

That is why the Christian faith is the proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection, and the daily challenge to live the experience of life and resurrection. We are effective evangelists when we are able to simply live day by day the experience of the death and resurrection of Christ in our own life, dying to sin and rising to eternal life.

We need to be able to share our own experience of the power of the transformative word of God living in us. When we are invited to talk about Jesus, we are fundamentally invited to talk about a living relationship with the person of Christ through the gift of faith and our experience of a life of prayer and attentive listening to the Word of God.

If somebody, asks you:

Why do you attend worship? The answer should be: because of Christ!

Why do you give time and resources to the church? The answer is: because of Christ.

Why do you serve others and help the people in need? The answer is: because of Christ.

Christ is the center, Christ is the reason, Christ is the cause, Christ is all and Christ calls us to all because of him and his Kingdom.

The Christian life is centered in Christ. We are invited to share this Christ-centered message to all the people of the world. Everybody needs to meet Christ.

In the short passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians that we read today, we find that these verses begin and end with something between an exhortation and an invitation.

Paul's letter is written to the small assembly of believers in Philippi, a significant city and proud Roman colony on the main east-west road between Byzantium and Rome. The letter has a thematic unity in spite of a number of abrupt changes of topic: Paul is eager to highlight Jesus' refusal to cling to any advantages that might have been his as God's own son. Jesus gives up the advantages of power to become God's call. When God exalts Jesus above all others after Jesus' death on a cross, Jesus' way of being in and among and for humankind is the light for us of God's love for us.³

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/> Commentary on Philippians 3:17-4:1 by Sarah Henrich. |

Paul sees himself and other evangelists of God's love in Christ as living in this same way, that is renouncing privileges and power in order to reach others by and for God's love.

Our passage once again sums up a call to a way of life and an understanding of a Godly life. That is to say a "citizenship in heaven" (Philippians 3:20) that has been repeated and developed throughout the letter. It begins with a direct description of how these believers might understand themselves as fellow imitators (NRSV "join in imitating").⁴

The imitation called for is not a matter of Paul's ego-driven mission rather Paul offers himself and others as those who are not "enemies of the cross," but find in the cross the true description of how God in Christ has come to serve.

Throughout this letter, Paul is trying so hard to clarify what "this way" in Philippians 4:1 really means for all the followers of Jesus, all those incorporated into his body. There is a present "this way" and a future. These two are connected by process. The key Greek verbs here are in the present tense (see Philippians 3:17 and 4:1). The Philippians are asked to follow a behavior and not to abandon what it means to "stand firm" (4:1) in Christ. Stand firm in Christ means living according to God in Christ ("heavenly citizenship", 3:20), as Paul and others are trying to do (3:17). "Keep on imitating," "keep on observing" so that you may continue to live (3:17) not as an enemy of the cross of Christ, but as one "standing firm" in the Christ who himself went to that cross.⁵

4 Idem.

5 Op. Cit.

It is a powerful passage, offering both a calling that is counter-cultural for the ancient recipients and perhaps even more so for us. The promise of life for those who have their citizenship in heaven is a continue transformation into the body of Christ's glory (Philippians 3:21). That transformative action begins with incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism. It is really important to say that never "heavenly citizenship" refers only to some reality beyond this earthly life.

The Philippians, like Jesus and Paul and others, are to live here on earth as citizens whose constitution (the gospel, cf. 1:27) comes from God, not from any other gods or emperors. Their lives, transformed by being caught up into the body of Christ, have now different values, different sources of power, different goals from those who are not living that life (cf. 3:18-19).

This letter, so marked by joy (Philippians 1:4, 25; 2:2, 29; 4:1) and affection, helps the Philippians to understand that true joy and hope flow from trust in God's promises, the presence of the transforming Holy Spirit, and a life lived in accordance with the "mind of Christ." Such joy is corporate rather than individual and is known in lives lived for the well-being of the neighbor rather than a life lived for the sake of one's own achievement.

The presence of Christ in our life brings a new mentality and also an incredible joy. We are transformed into citizens of the Kingdom of God. This radical transformation of mind and life has also an important consequence in our world. We are witnesses of Christ to the world. We are invited to share the message of Christ in a way that our new mind and vision and also our citizenship of the Kingdom of God are revealed and can inspire more people to look for the same Kingdom and personal relationship with Christ.

When we are inviting others to meet Christ, we are inviting them to experience the same transformative power that is acting in ourselves. This is the core of the Christian mission and the ministry of evangelism. Through history Christians have challenged governments, powers, distances, economic disadvantages, and many other limitations and shared their faith, because Christians through the centuries have firmly believed that the world needs to experience the transformative power of the Gospel and the living relationship with Christ.

The Church has only one option: to be a missional community or die.

We are invited to live the transformation and to proclaim the transformation or that transformation will not take place in our community. God will raise other communities to proclaim that transformation, the Kingdom will continue expanding with or without us.

There is an amazing blessing and an incredible joy when proclaiming the gospel and watching how lives are transformed and communities impacted.

I invite you to invite, to live and to share your faith with others. We are in Lent, the perfect time to recommit ourselves as ministers of the Kingdom, messengers of Jesus, living a Christ centered life, and sharing the love of Christ in word and deeds.

May God bless you and remember to say every day: I am a baptized Child of God and I am thankful.

Amen.