

The Walk of Christ, Pt. 3: The Word-Centered Life
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
April 3, 2011
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: John 1:1-5
Ephesians 2:1-10

What if I charged you today to be evangelical?

What if I said that, as a Christian, you have a responsibility to be evangelical and that your faith is not complete unless you live out that responsibility?

Would you check the front of the bulletin to see if you came to the right church this morning?

Would you think that I had waited until all the women went on retreat to pull a fast one and change very DNA of this place?

Would you call an immediate congregational meeting to question my spiritual leadership?

What if I told you that being evangelical is at the heart of the entire Christian experience as well as the Presbyterian tradition? (Note: I said *being* evangelical, versus being *an* evangelical, and I said the *entire* Christian experience and Presbyterian tradition.)

On this fourth Sunday in Lent, we continue our walk with Jesus to the cross. This year our path is shaped by this series of sermons and our personal devotions through which we are paying particular attention to Christ's habits, his ways, his disciplines, his manner of life. Out of those disciplines came major traditions that people of faith have practiced in all sorts of ways. Thus far, we have considered the contemplative tradition, that is, the life of prayer, and the holiness tradition, the life that is shaped by the virtues of Christ.

Today, as we consider the evangelical tradition, we're reminded of the power of words and the importance of the context in which those words are used. In the last couple of decades, the word "evangelical" has taken on a distinct connotation. It's become associated with the movement within the church that is, most often, socially conservative and non-denominational. Its standard bearer once was Jerry Falwell. More

recently it might be Pastor Rick Warren, who has built a dynasty out of a start-from-scratch church that became a national model. The political icon of the modern evangelical movement might be George W. Bush.

But that only accounts for the last quarter-century or so. The term 'evangelical' has been around for 500 years. For the vast majority of that time, it referred to the gospel truth, the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus. The great reformer Martin Luther used the term the "evangelical church" to distinguish Protestants from Catholics. The term was used broadly in Europe for centuries.

It took on particular meaning, however, in America. At first, it marked a new movement in American Christianity that stood apart from fundamentalism, the most conservative and literal approach to reading scripture. Through the contributions of preachers such as Billy Graham, the label evangelical was applied more to efforts to grow the church through outreach and conversion of new members.

It was more ecumenical and cooperative than the fundamentalist approach. It concentrated its efforts on numbers of conversions and focused on believers' role of accepting Jesus Christ versus God accepting us all through Jesus Christ.

The energy and achievements of evangelicals like Jerry Falwell and, more recently, Rick Warren came along after that. But church scholars and observers say even that era appears to be waning. Now the emerging church movement, led in part by people like Brian McLaren, has begun to add newer and notably different aspects to what it means to be evangelical.

But all of that is but a blink of an eye in God's time. So perhaps we are well advised to understand – and pay attention most – to what the sweep of the Christian tradition has meant by "evangelical." More important, most important, we should attend to what Christ did and said that modeled this vital part of the Christian life and inspires the same in us.

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In his book on the major Christian disciplines, Richard Foster concludes the chapter on the evangelical tradition with two questions and their answers:

Question: What is the Evangelical Tradition?

Answer: A life founded upon the living Word of God, the written Word of God and the proclaimed Word of God.

Question: Why should we explore it?

Answer: Because through it we experience the knowledge of God that grounds our lives and enables us to give a reason for the hope that is in us.¹

The good news, in its essence, is a promise: That God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived and died and was resurrected and, through whom, all are given access to new life.

This promise echoes through scripture. The promise was made before time and came to completeness in Christ. As we heard in the transcendent opening lines of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Those words are so familiar their meaning can evade us. Hear them again:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John continues:

He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

Do you hear the absolutes of that language? Nothing – no thing – came to be without our Creator's sovereign will, and the agent of that divine will, Jesus the Christ.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

There again, another absolute – this light is the light of *all* people.

This light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹ Streams of Living Water, p. 233

Pay attention to the verb tenses there. The light shines, now and forever. It is an open-ended guarantee. The light SHINES. Then there is the past tense regarding the darkness. It *did not* overcome the light. Past tense. Done deal. Perfect completion. Unconditional. Done. The light won.

These beautiful lines are why John's account of the good news stands apart from the other gospels. Those gospels disclose the grit and the grain of Christ's walk on earth, his relationships, his disappointments and victories, his human endeavor over 33 years. Those details, those episodes are important for us to know because we see our lives in them. But if nothing else had ever been written about the meaning of Christ, the first 71 words of John would still convey the power of the promise of God for all who ever hear them. This is the good news.

But it is not all of the good news for those of us who would be evangelical in the way of Jesus. Each of us has our own favorite scripture, one or two passages that for us are always within reach, a lifeline, a buoy when the waters of life get choppy and we work to keep our heads above water.

For me, the verse that explains the good news most succinctly yet completely is Ephesians 2:8.

“by grace you have been saved through faith.”

With remarkable economy and durable theology, these eight words complete the promise we find in the first 71 words of John. Pay attention to their order.

“by grace ...” The gospel begins outside of us, it comes to us ‘by’ another and the one-word descriptor of that other is ‘grace.’

“you have been saved” It is specific. You and you and you have been saved. We play a passive role. Our salvation is a gift that we receive without any doing on our part. Christ has done our part. That is the grace of it.

And finally, “through faith” Now our role is defined. We are to believe and to respond. We are not necessarily to wait for all of the scientific

evidence or to stand apart from the church and suspend judgment until we can see and understand every final detail. That is not faith.

Faith is to engage. To wrestle with the Word and to walk with others as they do the same.

On some days, that means bringing with all of our vigor our heart and mind and soul and experience to the breadth of the Word of God in scripture. On other days, “through faith” means letting the Word of God in scripture wash over us, being as still as possible and opening every vein of ourselves to its revelation.

On some days, “through faith” means fully realizing and celebrating the Jesus was fully human, feeling the same aches and pains and joys and sorrows that we feel every day. On other days, it means submitting ourselves to the coincident truth that, as the Gospel of John says, Jesus was the Word of God in flesh and blood, whose truth transcends our efforts to understand it fully.

On some days, it means submitting ourselves to the equally clear truth that the Word of God is ever-new and ever-emerging, through its proclamation. Proclamation is what Veronica and Zach and I and others do up here. But it is also through your witness to others. Imagine that!

And that, friends, is where the good news may take an unexpected – or even a bit unwelcomed or awkward – turn. It is good news that must be reported, every day. It is not an inanimate truth but one that is activated by God’s call on us to share it with others and our response to that call.

We do that in all sorts of ways. I haven’t seen any Caldwell members standing on the corner of Trade and Tryon bellowing the good news through a bullhorn, like that man who did that every day outside my office at the bank for weeks.

But you have your ways. It may not be to ask the lady in the grocery check-out line whether she knows Jesus. It may not be to walk door to door handing out tracks.

But you have your ways. Time and again, when I am around you, you find God in every-day life and you point God out. That is proclamation. You see how God works in making connections, in making a way out of no way, in reminding us when we need it that we are, thankfully, not in control. When we tell each other about those moments, that is proclamation.

When you are in the depths of depression or at the height of exultation and you turn to God, that is proclamation. When you speak up for the voiceless. When you serve others as the hands and feet of Christ, that, too, is proclamation of its own kind. That is what it is to be evangelical.

In writing about the evangelical tradition, Richard Foster points to St. Augustine as one who modeled evangelicalism in his day. As a young man, Augustine's soul wandered. He sewed his oats and drank too much wine and did the other things that young people do in their more wayward days. His prayer was one that many of us might pray. "Give me chastity and self-control, but not yet."

Then one day he was sitting in a garden, torn apart by the conflict of his ways and his knowledge that his ways were not God's ways, not the ways we see most clearly in the habits and disciplines of Jesus. He sensed the clear guidance of God to pick up the Word of God in scripture and he read it and he was changed.

Reflecting later on this moment of transformation, he wrote of God with these words: "You called, you cried out, you shattered my deafness: you flashed, you shone, you scattered my blindness: you breathed perfume, and I drew in my breath and I pant for you: I tasted and I am hungry and thirsty: you touched me, and I burned for your peace."

At the age of 32, Augustine was baptized on Easter morning, A.D. 387. He created a community devoted to only the reading of scripture. He later became the Bishop of the town of Hippo and has come to be revered as one of the great evangelicals of all time.

Augustine also left us with a memorable two-line saying that can inspire and guide our efforts as, yes, evangelicals.

“Without God, we cannot. Without us, he will not.”

Do you hear the symmetry in that? God’s initial action, the gospel of Christ, sets the truth in motion. But God’s will is that we be a part of that truth across the ages. It is our response to that truth to carry it into the world in what we say and do.

Without God, we cannot. Without us, he will not.

Thanks be to God. May it be so.

Amen.