

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
Sunday February 28, 2010

Luke 13:31–35
Philippians 3:17–4:1

DO WE FEEL OFFENDED OR INVITED?

About a hundred years before Paul wrote these words, something very important happened near Philippi. Two Roman generals won a great battle there. But at the same time, the Roman Empire was engaged in a bitter war. Julius Caesar's death had created a volatile environment back in Rome. People were choosing sides. Soldiers were having their loyalties swayed from one group to another. And so, these two generals far from home in Philippi, Anthony and Octavian, were on the battlefield having won the day but now faced the task of feeding a large army in a distant land. If they returned to Rome their armies would add to the political chaos. And if they stayed they would need massive resources just to feed their soldiers. (Octavian would eventually, during the time of Jesus, become known as Augustus and would rule the empire.)

These two generals made a crucial decision. They decided to give the land around Philippi to their soldiers. They paid them a reward for the service they had given to the empire. And now, almost a hundred years later, Paul writes to these believers, the children and the grandchildren of these early colonist soldiers. The church at Philippi was populated by legitimate Roman citizens, by Jewish converts (Paul is a wonderful example), and by the local people who were there before the soldiers put down their roots—Romans, Jews, and subjugated people. Paul says to the Philippians, "Remember at once I am all three of these."

And so Paul suggested to them that in their environment, if they need an example, they should imitate Christ by imitating him [Paul]. That just sounds horrible to us, doesn't it? It sounds like a really big-headed apostle. We don't even say "imitate me" today. And yet Paul claims to have that kind of authority. We like to live and let live. We like to say there are lots of ways to follow, in part because we're a conglomeration of people that have different histories. And those histories have shaped who we are: North Americans, South Americans, Europeans, Asians, Africans—foreigners and locals, citizens and refugees, mid-westerners and New Englanders, southerners and northerners—lifelong believers and new Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Conservatives, liberals, moderns and post-moderns, traditionalists and emergents.

Is it starting to sound a little personal at all? Can you find yourself in any of these groups? We're identifying. No matter our histories, we can learn from this teaching of the apostle Paul that whatever label others may place on us or whatever label we use for ourselves, our most important identifying characteristic is the one which redefines who we are and all that we ever hope to be. That identity is us sharing a bond in Jesus Christ. Before everything else first and foremost, we are his disciples. And the lifestyle

we follow—the purpose and the perseverance that we practice—are all because of the spirit of Christ.

We've all either heard it or said it. On that trip, when we're asked, "Are we there yet?" No. We're not there yet. We're on the way. We are still on the way, aren't we? We're in the process of becoming like Christ. In other places, Paul says, "Imitate me, not that I have attained it, but I'm on my way." If we are going to be on this journey, we have to constantly make choices—choices which draw us closer to the cross of Christ, or how does Paul say it here so boldly? "Choices that make us enemies of the cross of Christ."

I don't believe any of us, when we heard those words this morning, said, "Oh yeah; that's me. I see myself in that passage." But the choices we make—choices that are inevitable—either offend the message of the cross or they are an invitation for others to share our journey.

I'd like for us to think of this passage in another way—a way that may re-freshen our memories. Recently for Lent, we studied a wonderful movie, *Chocolat*. Remember? And there was chocolate all over this place, just as there was in the story. The story is about a strange woman and her daughter arriving in a French village, and their arrival is just as Lent begins. They decide, of all things, to open a chocolate shop; seemingly, in total disregard for the local Lenten custom.

And the story unfolds. There's a mayor who is insecure and cruel. People are drawn into the tension. The stage is set for civil and spiritual conflict. And everywhere you look people in the story are losing their focus. Their lives are filled with tension and unrest. If there is a part of the world that is filled with tension and unrest, we live in it for sure. And then finally on Easter Sunday, Pierre Henri climbs up to the lectern and he begins to speak, admitting that he wants to talk about something more important than the normal scripted sermons about Lent and the theological meaning of the Lord's divine transformation. Henri begins to talk about Jesus' life on earth. He remembers the kindness that Jesus embodied. He calls to their memory the tolerance that Jesus practiced. And then going completely off script, he says, "Look, we can't go around measuring our goodness by what we don't do, or by what we deny ourselves, or by what we resist, or what food we exclude. We have to measure our goodness by what we embrace, by what we create, and by who we include."

As we prepare to continue this life in Christ together, let me suggest some creative and inclusive practices for you to put in the process of living in your own home. During Lent, I would like for all of us to take time to intentionally have a heart to heart with God. And I'd like for us to do that also with a friend we may have been neglecting. And when we have those "heart to hearts," I want us to be careful to remember the importance of listening—listening to those that we re-engage, listening to God—as we make those heart to hearts a reality. And then I want us to be aware, especially here, of our over indulging in work. I'd like for us to think about how work dominates so much of our time and energy. And I'd like for us to evaluate again if we've established proper limits of work in our lives. Do we work in order to live? Do we live in order to work? And then I'd like for

us to be intentional and set aside some time—some extra time—this season to rest, to get enough sleep. That’s also a Lenten discipline.

I’ve been watching our animals, and as the weather took its toll on their time in exercise, I noticed that they counteracted by sleeping more. And also after each nap, they stretched more than I’d ever seen them stretch before. I wonder if we might take a lesson from just the simple order that God creates in an animal’s life. Are you stretching enough? Are you sleeping enough? Really? And then I’d like for us to take a break from all the buying we do—all the unnecessary purchases that we practice without even thinking—focusing again on what’s really essential, what’s needed. And then, use those savings to invest in something that is truly renewing to you: recreation, something that really feeds your soul, play, Worship, and enjoying God. All of this so that you can take care of yourself. For all our talk about taking care of others, if we’ve not given attention to taking care of ourselves, how can we be there for someone else?

And if you’re not sure you remember how to live this way, ask for help. Ask someone you trust how you can get back. For our choices in this season are God’s opportunity to remake us, to renew us, for God’s service.

So may it be. Amen.