

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 21, 2017
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 148
I Peter 3:8-18
John 15:1-8

In today's epistle lesson, the writer exhorts his readers with an intriguing comment in verse 15: "...if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it."

The King James renders this: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you."

The Holman Christian Standard Bible translates: "Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, renders it like this: "Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are."

The words "explain" or "defend" are translations of the Greek word *apologia*, from which we get our English word "apologetics." Apologetics is the branch of theology that deals with interpreting Christian faith to the culture in a credible and compelling way.

This is a needful thing, because the culture in which Christians try to share their faith often responds in one of two ways: with indifference, or with hostility.

Sometimes the surrounding culture is indifferent to the claims of the faith. Words that matter to Christians, such as *sin, salvation, discipleship, resurrection*, are alien terms to the culture. The terms, and the realities they describe, do not resonate with our pagan culture. Even to speak of Jesus as the Son of God can get you the response of blank stares in many cases.

On the other hand, sometimes attempts to live for Christ are met with hostility and opposition, as was the case for the readers of today's epistle. Christianity emerged into an empire that was built on hierarchical relationships, relationships that depended upon the subservience of slaves and women. When you stand up in that kind of climate, as the apostle Paul did, and say, "in Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female," (Gal. 3:28) you are the epitome of subversion and you are going to pay a price for it.

The history of the early Church is filled with examples of persons who were tortured and martyred because their decision to worship Christ as Lord put them in conflict with people of power.

And so, the writer of the epistle admonishes his readers to be "apologists," to be ready always to give an answer to the question, "Why are you a Christian?"

And this admonition is addressed to us also. Being a Christian "apologist" is not a calling reserved for religion professors in colleges or for the early apologists of the Christian Church like Justin Martyr or Polycarp. It is for all of us who want

to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. It is for all of us who want to shine our light into a world increasingly shrouded in shadows.

But how do we do it? How do we become “apologists” for our faith? It sounds like such a daunting task.

I offer you two suggestions this morning. Two possible ideas for how we might fulfill in our own lives the admonition to “always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within you.”

First, you can become an apologist simply by knowing *what* and *why* you believe. And you don’t need a Ph.D. in theology to do this. I recommend keeping it simple. But as Christians, we should know *what* we believe and *why* we believe it. We should be able to sit down and write on a piece of paper the phrase, “I am a Christian because

” and fill in the blank. It may be that one day someone will ask you, “Why are you a Christian?” In that moment, if you are able to answer that question in one or two simple sentences that affirm your faith, it will be a profound witness for Christ. In that moment, you become an apologist.

But there is a second, perhaps more important, way in which we witness to the faith. It has to do not just with *what* you believe, but with *how you live* what you believe.

The most effective apologists are those whose lives are intimately rooted in Christ. Look at verse 16 of our epistle: “But you must do this in a gentle and

respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ.”

This truth comes more forcefully to us from our Gospel lesson today. This familiar text from John’s Gospel has an almost mystical quality to it. Using the metaphor of a vine and branches, Jesus describes the kind of intimate relationship he desires for us, the kind of relationship that is essential for us if we are going to be his disciples.

There is so much in this text. But what I want us to see is that the best way for us to credibly witness to our faith is to *live so closely to Jesus that when other people look at us they don’t see us, but him!* Ultimately, our ability to give a reason for the hope that lies within us comes more from our *lives* than our *words*.

Let me share with you two stories that affirm this truth. The first is about a young lady who became a Christian, and wrote a letter to an older Christian woman whose life had influenced hers. This is what she wrote:

“When we met, I began to discover a vulnerability, a warmth, a lack of pretense [in you] that impressed me. I saw in you a thriving spirit...I could tell you were a growing person, and I liked that. I saw that you lived by convictions and priorities and not just by convenience, selfish pleasure, and financial gain. I had never met anyone like that before. I felt a depth of love and concern as you listened to me and didn’t judge me. You tried to understand me, you sympathized and you celebrated with me, you demonstrated kindness and generosity. And you stood for something. You were willing to go

against the grain of society and follow what you believed to be true, no matter what people said, and no matter how much it cost you. And for those reasons and a whole host of others, I found myself wanting what you had. Now that I've become a Christian, I wanted to write to tell you I'm grateful beyond words for how you lived out your Christian life in front of me. [From Joe Harding, "Share a Little Hope," in *Sermoncentral*, preached August, 2002.]

And here is a second example. The African bishop Desmond Tutu was once asked why he became an Anglican rather than joining some other denomination. He replied that in the days of apartheid, when a black person and a white person met while walking on a footpath, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass by. As the white person passed, the black person was expected to nod his head in a gesture of respect.

Tutu continues: "One day, my mother and I were walking down the street when a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, came toward us. Before my mother and I could step off the sidewalk, as was expected of us, this man stepped off the sidewalk and, as my mother and I passed, tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her! I was more than surprised at what had happened, and I asked my mother, 'why did that white man do that?'

My mother explained, 'He's an Anglican priest. He's a man of God. That's why he did it.'

When she told me that he was an Anglican priest, I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest, too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God.’ “

Brothers and sisters, we are called to have a reason for the hope that lies within us. But in the final analysis it is our lives -- rooted in relationship with Jesus -- which form the strongest *apology* for the faith we proclaim. Think about it. The simple act of stepping off a sidewalk and tipping a hat changed a young boy’s life and altered the course of history in South Africa.

As you think about this, do not underestimate your own life and your own witness. For the Spirit of God that was at work in that Anglican priest in South Africa is the same Spirit that is at work in your life, and in mine. That priest was merely a branch who was abiding in the vine, staying close to Jesus.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, let us come with the desire simply to stay close to Jesus. To abide in him. If we do that, the details about always being ready with an answer for the hope that lies within us will take care of themselves.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.