

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/25/2014, The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 17:22-34, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21
Testifying to Christ

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My main text for this morning's sermon is from our Epistle Lesson, from 1 Peter 3. It is a call to Christians to be ready to give a testimony to Christ, but to do so with gentleness and reverence. Saint Peter says this:

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence... (1 Peter 3:15, RSV)

Let's begin admiring this text by taking a look at a living example of a gentle and reverent testimony to Christ. I mean Saint Paul's speech to the Athenians recorded in our First Lesson, from Acts 17.

I like to imagine that Saint Paul's sermon in Athens caught the interest of those Greek folks. They were a sophisticated audience—proud inheritors of the ancient Greek traditions of philosophy, rhetoric, and drama, including the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Paul seems to have retained their interest for a while. He seems to have been able to hang in there and preach away in peace. But then he reached a point that ruined his sermon in the eyes of his congregation. He spoke of the death of our Savior Jesus.

...[God] has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him *from the dead*.”

Who needs a Saviour who suffers? we can imagine the Greeks thinking to themselves. Especially who needs a Savior who suffers death? That seems to have been the dismissive attitude of the Greeks. And so we have this disappointing outcome to Paul's sermon:

³²When they heard of the resurrection *of the dead*, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.”

³³At that point Paul left them. (Acts 17:32-33, NRSV)

Earlier than this, Saint Peter, on Pentecost Sunday in Jerusalem, had had much better success. Why, he had won a great multitude to Christ:

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41, KJV)

My! Our church would really leap ahead in size if we did that — added three thousand souls! I am eager for that!

So, Peter had success. But then, Peter was addressing Jews. Peter was addressing people who read their Bibles and for them, it was not such a wild stretch that the Savior should suffer.

“He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;” (Isaiah 53:3, RSV)

But for the Greeks, this talk of a Savior who died was implausible. It tended to disprove the sermon.

Still, there were a few who “clave” unto Paul. That’s how the King James Version puts it: they “clave” unto Paul. They attached themselves to him and became believers. We even know a couple of their names:

...Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

It pleases me, this mention of Damaris, because that is the name of one of my first Confirmation students here at Immanuel, Damaris Wollenburg.

In any case, for these few people, the notion of a Saviour who knew suffering and death somehow rang true. It found a place in their heart. Perhaps it made sense of things for them in some profound way.

FIRST PETER

Well, the suffering of Jesus is a repeated theme in First Peter. The apostle is writing to newly converted Christians in what is now Turkey. They are suffering persecution of various sorts. Saint Peter begins by asking them to be brave:

¹⁴But even if you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. (1 Peter 3:14-15, RSV)

How can they be so brave? How can they be sure that they will be blessed even in the midst of suffering for righteousness sake? Peter’s answer is Jesus. Jesus has known deep suffering, like them, but rose triumphant over it. Jesus is on the side of the persecuted Christians of Asia Minor, and so Peter encourages them to believe that ultimately nothing can do them any harm if they remain true to Jesus. Jesus makes all the difference in the world to their situation.

This immediately leads Peter to this morning's text. Peter is not content simply that these young Christians should be brave and bear with their suffering with trust in Jesus. He wants them also to be ready to explain to the world why they have some hope in this world. He wants them to be ready to speak of Jesus. And so we come to our main text:

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence... (1 Peter 3:15, RSV)

Historical/critical Bible scholars often wonder whether Saint Peter is the true author of this epistle. But I am old-fashioned about this in the sense that I believe in the inspiration of the Bible. I believe, then, that it is the will of God that when we read this epistle, we should bear in mind that impetuous but likeable disciple of our Lord Jesus—Peter, the rock upon whom Jesus builds his church (Matthew 16:18).

This is especially moving when we hear Saint Peter urge Christians to be prepared to make a defense of their faith to any one. The apostle knows well of what he speaks. He knows that courage can fail us at the critical moment. He knows that because he had faded away before the questions of a maid. It wasn't too long ago that we were thinking of these things. It is a Holy Week story:

⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a maid came up to him, and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." ⁷¹And when he went out to the porch, another maid saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷²And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." (Matthew 26:69-72, RSV)

Bitter tears taught Peter to stand up for Jesus next time. When Peter realized what he had done—how he had denied his Lord three times, just as Jesus had predicted—then the text says he wept bitterly:

And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:75, KJV)

Now, in his letter to the young Christians of Turkey, Peter urges them to be true to Jesus in their speech. He encourages them to always be prepared to give a testimony for the hope that is within them. He had *not* been prepared. The questions of the maid seem to have come upon him like sudden lightning. He was

unprepared for them and wilted before them. Now, he encourages these new converts to Christ to do better than he had done.

GENTLENESS AND REVERENCE

Notice a second thing about Saint Peter's counsel. Not only does he want Christians to be read to give their testimony, but also he wants them to give that testimony in a certain way, with a certain spirit:

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with *gentleness and reverence*... (1 Peter 3:15, RSV)

When you are trying to defend something or Someone who means the world to you, sometimes it is hard to be calm and measured. There is a temptation to become hot, to become hurtful, to make up for our paucity of words and arguments by shouting the few words that we do have. Saint Peter urges us to resist such heat and harm.

He uses two words, "gentleness" and "reverence," to describe the spirit with which we should make our defense of our faith. The word "gentleness" is pretty plain, I think. It means that we should remember to treat our opponents as we would like to be treated ourselves.

It is the other word that especially catches my interest: "reverence." We should conduct our defense of our faith with reverence. Reverence for what? Reverence for whom? I think there are two important answers. First, when we try to defend our faith we should maintain a sense of reverence for our opponent. Do not let such reverence slip away. In fact, in your prayers you might want to develop the holy habit of praying for your opponents. Picture them in your mind. Bring them into your imagination. Try to let them shine before you with radiance, for they *are* precious. They are dear to your Lord. They are dear to the very One you are trying to defend. They are the ones our Lord Jesus was willing to die for. Try to develop a set to your soul going forward so that when you give an account of your faith to others, you are able to deal gently with them, as if you cherish them.

But there is another Person to show reverence for when you are defending your faith. That is Jesus himself. It does no good to defend Jesus in a way that he would not choose to defend himself. It does not honor Jesus to destroy someone when Jesus himself does no such thing.

Saint Peter made this point beautifully in our Epistle Lesson from two Sundays ago (Easter 4), from 1 Peter 2. Let me recall his words for you:

²⁰...if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. ²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, that you should follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin; no

guile was found on his lips. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:20-23, RSV)

It is reverence for Peter's Master that Peter is urging upon all Christians. In our defense of our faith we should show reverence both for the ones to whom we are talking and for the One who when he was reviled, he did not revile in return.

Jesus himself had called Christians to bear with abuse. In fact, one of his Beatitudes concerns abuse for his sake:

¹¹Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. ¹²Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12, KJV)

And Jesus asks that we follow his own manner of life when it comes to the spirit with which we speak to others:

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... (Matthew 5:43, NRSV)

In this world, Christians might bear opposition. People might leave them behind because they are thought to be old-fashioned or too straight-laced. But Peter would say to Christians, do not grieve overmuch about opposition or suffering. If you are doing well, you will be blessed:

¹⁴But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. (1 Peter 3:14-15, RSV)

This is the conviction of the martyrs. They take to heart the teaching of Jesus:

²⁸And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28, RSV)

It is as if Saint Peter is saying to the Christians of Asia Minor and to us in our day: “This is what life has taught me. I have learned through tearful experience to trust Jesus in this matter. I had heard him preach this saying, but I was afraid of those who can kill the body, and so I denied and forsook my Lord. Now I ask you to do better than I did.”

STAND UP, STAND UP FOR JESUS

There is a hymn in the “Witness” section of our hymnal called “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” (LBW 389). I wonder whether you have ever sung it before. In my twenty-two years here at Immanuel, I do not remember ever singing it. And certainly it is a hymn that did not make it into the new hymnal, ELW. I suspect the reason for that is the military imagery in the hymn, with its call to be a brave “soldier of the Cross.”

But courage is often the issue when it comes to standing up for Jesus. So as I near the end of this sermon, let me offer a simple observation about the courage that you and I often need in standing up for Jesus. I suggest that for us here in America, the courage we need is usually not the big courage of standing up to state persecution, like for the Christians in ancient Asia Minor, but rather the more humble courage of standing up to the maid — the one before whom Peter faded away. What might well take courage enough for us is simply to stand before our children and to speak of Jesus. Or to stand before our Sunday School class and speak of Jesus. Or to stand before the Catechism Class and witness to Jesus. I mean, as the years have gone by I have almost come to flinch when I try to pass on the traditional convictions and morality of the church to our Catechism children, because I know that their schools sometimes aggressively teach them something quite different. And so I sometimes find myself saying, “Yes, that is what we really believe. We really believe the God has created everything, and that a good kingdom is coming where the wolf dwells in peace with the lamb and where God himself wipes away every tear from the eye. We really do believe in purity in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We really do believe in being true to our husband and wife for the rest of our lives. We really do believe in turning the other cheek, and high integrity in business practices, and do not litter because it is a violation of the Seventh Commandment (a recent theme I’ve been haranguing them about.)

HOPE — A GOOD WORD

Let me close by lifting up one word in my sermon text, a good word: hope. Saint Peter urges us to always be ready to offer a defense of the “hope” that is within us. He is not asking us to defend wild plans to conquer the world, or cruel plans to rob and main and kill, or greedy plans to trick elderly people across the land out of their life’s savings, or anything wicked like that. It is rather that if you are a Christian you have some hope in life. You do not have to face life alone, for, as Luther put it long ago, a Champion fights at your side. And Saint Peter, bless his soul, is asking us to be ready to share this hope with others, so that life might not be so lonely and tough for them, and so that some glory will be brought to our Savior Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.