

John 14: 15-21; Acts 17: 22-31; 1 Peter 3: 13-22
Olivet Church, May 21, 2017

Accounting for the Hope that is in You

Some people find the Apostle Paul to be a bit harsh, intolerant, and dogmatic. But in our reading from Acts today, we find an Apostle Paul with a different temperament. Witnessing to the crucified and risen Christ in Athens he is clear and bold. But he is also respectful, affirming, and compassionate toward his listeners. In Peter's words, Paul was "ready to witness to the hope that was in him; yet did it with gentleness and reverence."

Michael Weller, who with his wife Rachel, is serving as a Presbyterian missionary with the church in Ethiopia shares a story that encouraged him in sharing a bolder witness to Christ. After college he was serving as a Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer in Mission, teaching at a school affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of Egypt. While there the Islamic cleric in the town he was living in invited him to a dinner. After the meal the cleric wanted to talk about their respective faiths. Trying to be inoffensive Michael spoke about each person finding their path, and the different paths leading to God. The cleric pounded his fist on the table and said, "How can we have a conversation about faith if you won't take your own faith seriously." In Peter's words, Michael learned that "witnessing to the hope that was in him could be done boldly, and with gentleness and reverence."

Most of us are not accustomed to encountering the question, "What is the source of your hope for yourself, for the world, for the poor, the suffering, the dying? Why are you a Christian? What does Jesus Christ mean to you?" Yet the gospel of God's love, presence, redemption, and promises in Jesus is good news that brings abiding, abounding, certain hope.

Paul was taken to the Aereopagus to witness to that hope. He was called to witness in a culture that acknowledged and embraced many gods and was curious about new religious teachings. Athens had a diverse, syncretistic religious environment, like the taxi cab in southern California a writer described, which had a rabbit's foot in the cup holder, a bubblehead Buddha on the dashboard, a crucifix dangling from the mirror, and a Darwin "fish with feet" emblem on the trunk. There were testaments to many Gods in that taxi cab, even as there were shrines and altars to many Gods in Athens as people sought to cover all the spiritual bases.

The Christians Peter writes to are told to be prepared to witness to their hope as they suffer derision and persecution with forbearance. It is a well-established fact that faith in God, and in a life and future that transcends immediate circumstances, shows forth more brilliantly, and invites people's attention and inquiry, when those circumstances are difficult and painful. What enables you to face scorn and persecution with calmness? What is it that enables you to not respond to evil with evil... but with good, and with love? What enables you to deal with failure and disappointment with composure? What enables you to face death without fear?

"Be ready to give an account of your hope," Peter says, knowing that the opportunities to witness to the hope in their hearts will be multiplied during the experience of mistreatment and suffering of these early Christians. In the original Greek what Peter urges is that we be ready with an

“apology” for our faith. And the original meaning of the word “apology” is not about saying you’re sorry, but giving a well-thought-out explanation. Mostly the word was used in courtroom settings in which attorneys were expected to produce evidence by which to build a convincing case for a judge or jury. Peter is saying that even as a lawyer would not walk into court without having done his or her homework, so we should not walk out into the marketplaces, community gatherings, schools, or offices of life without having devoted some time to thinking through our faith, described by Peter in chapter 1 as, “the living hope we have been born into, and glorious inheritance we have been given through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

To give an accounting, to witness to the hope that is in us, is what Christian evangelism is all about. Evangelism, sharing or witnessing to the good news, is not judging, manipulating, or demeaning others. As evangelists we are not in the judgment seat but on the witness bench. We share with others what Jesus Christ means to us and what he has done in our lives. We give an account of the hope within us.

Raised as a good mannered Presbyterian I learned to err on the side of silence when it came to evangelism lest I be associated with those tract carrying, scripture quoting, hell-threatening fundamentalists who kept track of the number of souls they had brought to Jesus. So the first time I actually remember witnessing to my faith was in a late night discussion with a college friend about how it was possible to have hope for the world given all of the entrenched issues, looming crises, and threatening environmental disasters, nuclear war clouds, and populations bombs. As we talked on through the night, my friend David expressing deep despair and cynicism, I was backed into a corner and found myself saying very earnestly “I have hope because I trust in God’s loving, redeeming work in this world even in the face of the most frightening, threatening circumstances.” “Really,” David said. “I wish I could have that kind of hope.”

Anyone fearful of appearing imposing and controlling in their testimony to their hope through Christ needs only to be reminded that we now live in a post-Christian era. Mainline Protestant communities no longer dominate American social and political life. Christian values are no longer the undisputed norm for our culture. Membership in many, if not most, Christian denominations has been plummeting for decades. The fastest growing religious affiliation people identify with on surveys is "none."

Peter Gomes, while minister of Memorial Church at Harvard was visiting with a dean at the school who showed him the wonderful view of the church from his office window. “You know,” said the dean, “I’m sure if we were doing this again, we would never put Memorial Church in so prominent a location, right in the middle of Harvard Yard.”

Maybe the Presbyterian Church, and Christians in the U.S., are in a position in relation to the culture that is more akin to that of Paul in Athens, and the minority, marginalized community of believers Peter wrote his letter to. We need not fear being perceived as controlling, dogmatic, and judgmental when we have no power but that of love. We only have a hope to testify to out of love for our neighbors, and love for God. Perhaps our new marginal status in American and western culture liberates us to witness more boldly in gentle, respectful ways.

Surveys actually indicate that people are becoming increasingly spiritual. Which I would interpret as indicating that growing numbers of people acknowledge the reality of a spiritual realm and have a heartfelt desire to bring their lives into connection and conformity with it. Now since the fundamental business of the church is helping people make a life-giving connection with God and live in harmony with the transcendent spiritual realm, than you would think people would be flocking to churches wanting to learn about God, about prayer, about living for things eternal, about growing in the life of hope, peace, joy and love that comes through faith. But the truth is, that while surveys indicate a growing interest in spirituality, they also indicate a growing contempt for Christian churches and disdain for Christians.

The Apostle Paul blazes a path for us in witnessing to our hope in Christ with gentleness and reverence, by affirming the Athenians spiritual interests, drawing on the words of their poets, speaking through their philosophers of the nature of God who created the world and directs the destinies and boundaries of nations, yet is intimately close to each of us because in God “we live and move and have our very being.” And since we are God’s very children we are to live in right relationship with our Maker, with other people as our brothers and sisters, and with this creation God made, loves, redeemed, and will restore.

Some years ago Rob Bell travelled the country on his “The God’s Aren’t Angry Tour” describing the development of religious practices over time as humans sought the help and favor of the gods. His address, like Paul’s to the Athenians, began with a recognition of the spiritual hunger and practices of humankind. I remember particularly his description of the more extreme religious practices of human sacrifice as through time people, like the Athenians, sought to appropriately appease and thank the gods. But the part of his talk that stirred my heart and brought tears to my eyes was the conclusion, when like Paul at the Areopagus, he showed the satisfaction of our groping and searching in the loving purposes of God for us and the world in Christ and his death and resurrection.

How can we witness to the hope within us amidst the idols of our time and culture? Though they may not be graven images and housed in shrines or sacrificed to at altars, the means by which we seek value, security, purpose, and transcendence apart from the Maker of Heaven and Earth in whom we live and move and have our being, are indeed idols. And in the opioid epidemic and other social well-being indicators, as in the surveys showing a heightened interest in spirituality, do we not see an indication of the inadequacy of those idols and the disillusionment with them? Do we not hear a voice beckoning “can you give us a witness to the hope that is in you?” “Can you tell us the meaning of Christ and his death and resurrection to you, so that we might believe that we and this world are loved, cared for, and have a purpose and a glorious future in God?”

The late Howard Thurman, who was dean of the chapel and first African American professor at Boston University, and a mentor and counselor to the leaders of our nation’s civil rights movement, attributed his own sense of dignity and vocation to his grandmother. She was a former slave who repeated to him the message she had heard in worship. Over and over she told him, “You are somebody!” Once when traveling through the South in the 1950’s, Thurman and his family stopped to rest at a park along the highway. His daughters spotted a swing set on a playground in the park and pulled their father toward it. They couldn’t read the sign that warned that this playground was for “whites only by state law.” Sadly, but patiently, Thurman told his

little girls that they could not play there and explained why. This was their first real encounter with the cruelty of racism, and they burst into tears. So, much as his grandmother had done when he was a child, Thurman gathered his children into a warm embrace and said to them, “Listen, you little girls are somebody. In fact, you are so important and so valuable to God and so powerful that it takes the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the whole state police force to keep you little girls off those swings!”

Increasingly, amidst all idols, circumstances, fears and anxieties, and conditions that would threaten or diminish us we need to hear those words, “you are somebody!” Because of Jesus and his death and resurrection; you are somebody! You are loved, you are valuable to God, you are powerful in God’s Spirit; you are somebody! Will you be prepared to give an accounting of that hope that is in you?