

May 14, 2017

TEXT: I Peter 3:13–22

TITLE: The Defense Never Rests

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Five times a year we hold Inquirers' Classes which people interested in learning about membership in this church are encouraged to attend. Sometimes in those classes, I'll ask the people around the table to imagine that they've just walked out our church doors and bumped into someone who said to them, "Excuse me, I see that you were in that Presbyterian Church. What do Presbyterians believe anyway?" How would you answer that question? What would you say not only about who we are but also about what we believe?

In the early years of Christianity, how one answered questions like that was critically important. Followers of Christ who were Jewish experienced social disruptions like being kicked out of their homes and their synagogues because of their profession of faith in Christ. And those who were Greek or Roman were literally persecuted for following our monotheistic religion with a crucified Savior because it challenged the divinity of Caesar himself. The writer of I Peter addressed this issue head on—first by offering a beatitude saying, *Blessed are those who suffer for doing what is right*. Then comes three powerful exhortations: *Do not fear what they fear. Do not be intimidated. And always be ready to make a defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope, the faith, that is in you.*

Do not fear. Don't be intimidated. Always be ready to make a defense. The juxtaposition of those three phrases turns a simple pep talk into something more confrontational. It's like you're wearing the sports jersey of a non-Pittsburgh team like the Cubs or the Browns and someone asks you defend your loyalty to them. Or it's as if you're a white collar worker and someone asks you to defend the company you work for; or if you live in a nice house and someone asks you to defend the part of town you live in; or (let's be honest here) you worship in a big cathedral with an endowment and someone asks you to defend the church you belong to.

Making a defense can easily make you defensive. Being challenged can evoke defensive, testy responses from us—like when someone criticizes our kids and they rile up our inner Mama Bear. You know what I'm talking about. I saw a t-shirt for a baby that had printed on it: *Be careful what you say to me. My grandma's crazy and I'm not afraid to tell on you.* I confess that I get defensive and have my Mama Bear instincts emerge when people criticize our church—pointing out to folks that, yes, we have the resources to do major renovations on our building but we're doing it so we can better serve the groups who come into our church from the outside community, like our Hope Academy music programs or hosting choirs and 12-Step meetings here. And I can get defensive when people argue about the gentrification of East Liberty, wrongly believing that all redevelopment of

empty property means someone else suffered, when in effect subsidized housing, market-rate housing, good schools, new businesses, and good transportation are all needed for East Liberty to be a truly livable community.

There are lots of topics about which making a defense can become defensive—voting Republican vs. Democratic, abortion vs. women’s rights, racism vs. white privilege, LGBT inclusion, migrant workers rights, and so on. Speaking up is vitally important, even when it’s hard—even when people disagree. I saw a photo of a small white barn onto which someone had painted: *Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes*. It’s true. As I Peter says: Do not fear what they fear. Don’t be intimidated. Always be ready to make your defense. But, bless our souls, must making a defense always be angry and defensive?

In the gospel passage that Elliott read earlier, one of the disciples asked Jesus to draw aside the curtains a bit so they might glimpse some of the glory of heaven. Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” Jesus’ response was not defensive but loving: *Philip, have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me?* This points to the critical part of our conversation. When you are asked to make a defense of something, the starting part is not out there but in here (pointing at our hearts). It’s not the words I can say to win this argument, the leverage I can use to get my way and prove I’m right. Rather, it is what is in my heart, what is in my inner well of resources from which I’m carefully drawing out the words that will become my response to this person.

Philip said, “*Lord show us the Father*” pointing to heaven. Jesus redirected his gaze and said, “*I been with you all the time. As you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father.*” I Peter says “*Do not fear and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.*” Before making your defense, take a breath—remember that all we are, all we say and do, is done as part of our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord, who we’ve seen and whom we seek to follow. Then, out of that sanctified inner conviction, speak up and make your defense, speaking the truth out of love, even if your voice shakes.

That’s the first part of making a defense without being defensive. The second part is also found in the words of I Peter when it says, “*Always make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.*” The hope that is in you. If you step outside our church doors, whether after attending an Inquirers Class or a Sunday morning service, and someone asks you why you attend here, on some level they are asking, “What do you believe in? What do you hope for the future?” To worship God in Christ today means we see ourselves as part of a story that moves from the past through this very moment and continues on to the future. It means we believe that choices matter and that molding our life after the example of Christ—opening our life to the leading of the Holy Spirit—sets us on a trajectory that is hopeful and trustworthy. Does that mean it will be free of trouble or suffering? No. Does that mean it will be without conflict or discord or disappointment? No. But it does mean that things

like trouble, suffering, conflict and disappointment are not the final words for our life.

A hopeful perspective is a forward-looking perspective. There's a simple saying that goes like this: *We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.* One of the hardest parts of being good stewards of what God has given us in this lifetime is that we must take a long view of things—we are to remember we are borrowing this earth from our children. One quick example: People may logically understand that climate change is real, but they mostly only focus on environmental changes they see happening right now. Places along coastlines that 50 years ago only had 5 or 6 times of minor flooding per year now have 30 to 60 times a year in which streets or entire neighborhoods are washed out simply by high tides and regular storm surges. Instead of seeing this as a significant climate change problem demanding action now, people dismiss it as “nuisance flooding” and come up with band-aid fixes instead of long-term solutions.¹

A hopeful perspective is a forward-looking perspective. It is also an honest perspective. It knows that there is evil in the world, brokenness in human lives and human society, and these things must be honestly named and confronted wherever possible. Religion writer Karen Armstrong wrote a book called Fields of Blood, and she bluntly said this: *It is impossible to fully implement the ideals of religion in the inescapably violent realm of politics [today].* She rightly argues that national governments that depend upon force—Russian, Chinese, even American—will never be able to fully implement the core humanitarian values of Christianity.² That may be hard to hear, but truth-telling about the disconnect between American militarism and Christian virtues needs to be part of our honest defense about what we believe.

Lastly, a hopeful perspective is not only honest and forward-looking; it is faithful. It draws on the reserves from a heart transformed by Christ, a spirit willing to suffer for what is right and ever eager to do what is good. This is still the season of Easter and so we boldly profess to be a resurrection people. Resurrection is not symbolized in tulips and lilies that bloom today and are discarded tomorrow. Resurrection faith is the planting of apple seeds today that won't become fruit-bearing trees for 10 or more years. Resurrection faith is the presenting of bibles to 3rd-graders (which we'll do next Sunday) so they will remember the promises we made to nurture them in the Christian faith and pass out bibles to 3rd-graders of their own in the next generation. Resurrection faith is having photographs by artists like Hannah Price hanging in our building so that the shadows of racism will always be challenged by the corrective light of Christ's egalitarian vision. Resurrection faith is rearranging walls and renovating offices designed for a 1930s Presbyterian ministry so that children and adults of today will develop a faith that serves them for generations to come.

¹ Cf. Jon Mooallem, “The Deluge”, *New York Times Magazine*, April 23, 2017, p. 40.

² Karen Armstrong, Fields of Blood, p. 336.

Everyday someone looks at you as the answer to the questions: What do you believe? Why do you go to church—to that church? Do not fear what they fear—as you offer back a defense of faith that casts out fear. Do not be intimidated, as you draw on the reserves of Christ's love implanted in your heart. And always be ready to make your defense of the honest, forward-looking and faithful hope that is in you through Christ Jesus. And may that defense never rest.

AMEN