

Sunday, May 21, 2017 - SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: Psalm 66:8-20 and 1 Peter 3:13-22

Sermon title: "Always be ready to make your defense"

Background (1 Peter 3:13-22): Depending on when one dates the letters of Peter, the situation referred to in 1 Peter 3:13-22 could range from mild abuse and mockery at the hands of the families of these new Christ-believers, to open, official, and harsh persecution by Roman officials under Domitian (81-91 CE). In reflecting upon the message of the epistle, it is not necessary to know for sure what kind of suffering the early Christ-believers were facing. Those to whom 1 Peter is addressed had to prepare themselves for the consequences of their belief. The author of 1 Peter 3:13-22 uses several strategies to encourage his addressees to be willing to suffer for their faith.

1. We should note first the strong future orientation of these words. Peter, like Paul and other first-century teachers, believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent and that believers should prepare accordingly. Vs. 14 cannot be understood unless we see it in these future terms. Believers may suffer "for doing what is right," but they are nevertheless "blessed," presumably in the life to come. Today we don't usually have this future orientation as part of our thinking - partly because the second coming of Christ has been delayed far longer than first-century believers thought it would be - but do we need to refocus? How would our thinking about present circumstances change, if we took this view of the future - namely, Christ is coming (at any time), and we will be rewarded for standing firm in our faith?

2. Another strategy that Peter recommends here (vs. 18) is the reminder that Christ himself suffered. In other words, we should remember that we are not the first to suffer for what we believe. Having just come through another Holy Week, how does the knowledge of Christ's suffering for us give us comfort with our own afflictions? Or not?

3. I don't plan to say much at all about this in my sermon on Sunday, but these verses contain a very interesting piece of information (vs. 19) that many believers (in my experience) have never heard before. Remember the sentence in the Apostles' Creed "he descended into hell"? Ever wondered what that refers to? What does it mean that Jesus "descended into hell"? Historically, the Christian church has found the answer to that question in these verses. At his death, it is said, Jesus went to "the place of the dead" and preached the gospel to those who died before having the opportunity to hear the gospel. You might want to take a few minutes to reflect on what this means and how important it is.

4. You probably will not be surprised to learn that in my sermon for Sunday I plan to focus on vs. 15, especially the words, "**Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you....**" Historically, Christians have interpreted these words as a call to apologetics, which may be defined simply as giving a defense for the faith. In ancient Athens, *apologia* referred to a courtroom procedure in which the defendant was allowed to refute the charges against him. The use of the word is not limited to this chapter. It occurs 17 times throughout the New Testament as either a noun or verb. The meaning of the word here in 1 Peter is similar to the meaning in Paul's later epistles and also in Luke's gospel; it refers to the response a Christian must make to those who slander them for their beliefs.

However, you won't be surprised to learn that Christians have differed sharply over the years on what sort of defense we should be prepared to give.

I grew up in a theological tradition that didn't spend a great deal of time "defending" the faith. We were to put our energy into living exemplary lives. One notable exception from my background is Alvin Plantinga, a distinguished philosopher who recently won the Templeton Prize in religion for

his rigorous engagement with 20th century philosophers. Plantinga has written extensively about proofs for the existence of God and how divine foreknowledge is consistent with human free will. (How I received passing grades in his classes at Calvin College remains a mystery to me.)

Others, not from my background (Ravi Zacharias is a name that comes to mind) have devoted much of their lives to this work. One of Zacharias' best known quotes is "We have a right to believe whatever we want, but not everything we believe is right." These words illustrate his fierce devotion to the truth. Perhaps you have heard him speak in person (or have seen videos of his speeches).

One of the prize winners in the 2016 Book of the Year competition, sponsored annually by *Christianity Today*, was Dallas Willard, now deceased but formerly professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California. Willard's argument can be summarized in these words from his book, *The Allure of Gentleness: Apologetics in the Manner of Jesus*: "When we do the work of apologetics we do it as disciples of Jesus, and therefore in the manner in which he would do it. This means, first of all, that we do it to help people, and especially those who want to be helped. Apologetics is a helping ministry."

You might find it useful to reflect alone or with others in your group about the proper role of apologetics in today's world. To be a defender of the faith requires that we know something about our faith - and also about the attacks that others make about it. It requires some effort to engage in this work, but do we have a choice?

I would be curious to hear your conversations about this!