

TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST - OCTOBER 12, 15 & 16, 2005

St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

Do You Have The Answer? 1 Peter 3:13-17

A few years ago I was talking to someone about finding a church home for his family. I suggested certain possible churches in the community where that person and his family were living. One of the questions that he asked me was, "Are the pastors in that church real? I wasn't sure I understood what he meant? So I asked, "What you do mean?" He said, "Do they believe what they preach?" I asked him, "How can you tell?" He said, "If they read their sermons to me and don't appear really to be into it, then I don't consider them real." I have never forgotten that conversation.

If you want to share what you believe with someone, be real. Be yourself. Don't speak in a language and vocabulary that is not you. Be honest. Don't pretend to be what you are not. But do speak the truth in love. When people come to us seeking help and answers, do we have the answers? Sometimes I wonder if we really believe that we do have the answers that can help people on their journey through this life to finally be with the Lord forever.

In the section from Peter's first letter that we have before us today for our consideration and thought we hear the Apostle Peter talk to us about giving answers for the hope that you and I have. Let's ask ourselves the question, **DO I HAVE THE ANSWER?**

Peter wrote this letter to first century Christians in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. These Christians were under continual attack and persecution. Since most of the early Christians were not Roman citizens, they had no property or civil rights. Their property could be seized by the government and taken from them. They could be arrested and enslaved. They could be killed just because they claimed to be a follower of Jesus Christ. These early believers were living in a hostile society. It wasn't until 311 AD that Christianity was legalized and recognized by the state. Peter writes his letters to encourage a people under attack and persecution. Now this seems rather strange coming from the pen of Peter, doesn't it? Peter was the one when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane who drew his sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. He was the one who was the first to put up a fight and physically defend his Lord. But Peter has been changed by his Savior. His approach is not so much in your face any longer. He counsels people to bear with patience the suffering and persecution that they encounter. He then encourages those early believers and us, Christ's followers in 2005, to be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks us the reason for the hope that we have.

How can we give the answers that we need to give? Peter first of all addresses the fears that his readers had and we also may have when we identify ourselves as Christians. He writes, "Who is going to harm you, if you are eager to do good? But even if you suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." (Vv. 13 & 14) Peter comments that normally people aren't going to harm you or persecute you for trying to do something good. But he says if that does happen, you are blessed. Remember our Savior's words, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:20b)

SET APART CHRIST AS LORD

Now the Peter proceeds to give us some very concrete directions on being a witness for Jesus Christ. He writes, “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.” (v. 15a) This is the same as when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “hallowed by thy name.” How do we keep God’s name holy? We do this when his word is taught correctly and we live godly lives according to it.” If you and I are going to be able to give answers to people who ask the reason for the hope that we have, we need to be in God’s Word. We need to be reading his Word on a daily basis and meditating and considering what that word means in our lives. We also need to put our lives in order. We need to be striving to live lives that reflect the faith that we profess. The importance of living a godly life was brought home to me recently when I was speaking to someone who is not a Christian. This person commented to me on how a particular family he knew, who professed to be Christians, were continually fighting, bickering, and condemning others. He then commented that his family was very supportive of each other and not at one another’s throats. Just think what kind of witness this Christian family was giving to this unbeliever? If we are going to be good witnesses for our Savior and be able to give the answers we need to give for those seeking the truth, we need to set apart Christ as Lord in our lives. We need to be in his Word, feeding ourselves with the truth, growing in our faith and understanding. When we realize from what a mess God has rescued and delivered us, we will just naturally want to tell others what this means. This good news also impacts the way we live. So we will be striving to conform our lives to what God says in that Word.

BE PREPARED

Peter now writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer.” (V. 15b) The concept of preparedness has been in the news for the last month. Ever since the city of New Orleans and the Federal Government seemed to show a lack of preparedness for the devastation of a direct hit on the city by a hurricane, our attention has been turned to being prepared for a natural disaster. You probably have read or heard that the majority of the cities of our nation are not prepared to handle a mass evacuation in the face of a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. Now we are also being bombarded with the thought of a pandemic flu causing the deaths of millions and millions of people throughout the world. Our leaders are not God and they cannot avert these disasters. They may make plans and that is good, but no plan will always deal with every possibility or unforeseen event.

As Christians it is also good for us to have plans to be able to share what we believe with others. There have been a number of ways that people have devised to simply share Jesus with others. There are certain truths that need to be discussed. The first is **SIN**. The reason we have the problems and troubles we have is because of imperfection. We need to acknowledge our own imperfection and the failure of all to be holy. Then we need to talk about **GOD’S LOVE**. Sin only leads to hopelessness and despair. But God has done something to deal with our problem of sin. He sent his only Son to live, die and rise from the dead for us. Because of what Jesus has done, we are all forgiven. Then we focus on **FAITH**. All of these blessings – forgiveness, eternal life, peace and joy, God freely offers to all. They become ours when we believe God’s promises and this power to believe God gives us through His Word and Sacraments. And finally we talk about **WORKS**. When the Spirit of God enters a person they desire to live for their Lord. God’s law is no longer a burden but it becomes a delight as believers work to conform their lives to the will of their loving and forgiving heavenly Father. That’s one plan. You can come up with your own. But have some simple way that you can share with someone else the hope that you have. Always focusing on Jesus and what he has done for you and what he means to you.

GIVE REASON FOR THE HOPE YOU HAVE

Peter then continues, “to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (v. 15c) We are not called to argue religion or even talk about religion. We are to talk about the reason we have the hope that we do. What is that reason? It is Jesus Christ. Jesus did not call us to be his defenders. He called us to be his witnesses. We are to tell what we have seen and heard. Where did we see and hear this? In God’s Word. As the sermon hymn we sang put it so simply and beautifully, “I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love.

BE GENTLE AND SHOW RESPECT

As we tell the wonderful story of Jesus we do it with gentleness and respect. We don’t try and ramrod this down someone’s throat. I thought it interesting that Peter writes, “give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” We need to be respectful of other people. We need to listen to them and to their questions and to point them to Jesus their Savior. We are not promoting some denomination. We are not called to compare churches and put some down over others. As we initially deal with people who have never heard of the Lord or who have fallen away from the Christian faith, we need to focus them on the truths of the Bible and on their Savior Jesus. As we deal with different cultures, we also need to show respect for the other person’s culture and background. If we are to get a hearing for the Gospel, we need to listen to the other person and respect them.

Peter then concludes his remarks to us, “keeping a clear conscience. So that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” (Vv. 16-17) Notice how he again brings us back to our living a decent and upright life. So if people speak evil against us, they have no grounds for their accusations and will be put to shame for their slander.

Do you have the answers? As followers of Jesus Christ we do have answers for the reason why we live in hope. We do know why we don’t have to carry around the burden and guilt of sin – because of Jesus’ life and death for us. We do know where we are going when our life ends in this world. We are going to the Lord in heaven because our salvation depends on God. We do know that everything that happens in our lives has a reason and purpose as God’s children and our Lord will always work it for good. Give these answers to people who ask you the reason for the hope you have. Do it gently and with respect for the other person.

Amen.