

1 Peter 3:15-16

All Saints Sunday - District Youth Gathering (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Revelation 7: 9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

C'mon, Be an Angel!

May 25, 2014

“but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

A young man who had been very active in his church and youth group was hired to work in the oil fields for the summer. Knowing the reputation of the crews in the oil patch of having a rough, often worldly lifestyle, his friends and family were concerned about he would survive in the camp. When he returned at the end of the summer, his friends asked him how things went. “Oh real well”, he said, “I was there all summer and they never knew I was a Christian”.

All too often it seems that we, who know the blessings of Christ’s forgiving grace for us, and who have experienced the power of that saving grace which has set us free from sin, from death, and from the very power of the devil, can seem to be ashamed of being identified as followers of Christ. At the very least, we find it difficult to talk about our faith—what Peter refers to in our text as *the hope that is within us*. Like that young man, we seem to be content if people don’t really know that we are believers in the true God, who has made himself know to us in His Word of life and in the living Word, Jesus Christ.

If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? If you had to give testimony to your faith, would you know what to say? All too often, we feel unprepared to speak about our faith. We don’t know what to say about the God who has marked us as his own and who gives us life as His children through our baptism. We don’t know what to say about Jesus, who has saved us. This weekend, the young people attending our youth gathering have been talking about the best defence and how we can be prepared to share *the hope that is within us*. In our world today there is a need, like never before, for the hope, the peace, the joy and the confidence that comes only through God’s grace in Jesus Christ and made known through His Holy Spirit at work in the Word of Life. Even if people don’t want to hear what we have to say; even if they think they don’t need it, the truth is the world needs us to be prepared to make a defence for our faith.

There is an old sports philosophy that says the best defence is a good offense. Peter does caution us that our witness to Christ should never be offensive in the sense of being rude, hurtful, or disrespectful. But, as those who *honour Christ the Lord as holy* we are to be ready to make a strong, powerful defence for our faith and hope. So, on this All Saints day, let’s all learn that we can do this. Come on, folks, be an angel, as you speak in a winsome, loving and unwavering way of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer.

My wife, saw the title of the sermon and she was concerned that I might confuse people by leading them to think that they can be, or are going to be, angels. Let me be clear, right up front: when we think of the saints who have gone before us—all those who have died in the faith—not one of them has become an angel. We do not become angels when we die. You and I will never earn a pair of wings in heaven. Remember what an angel really is. The word *angel* means *messenger*. God’s created angels are *“ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation”*. (Hebrews 1:14, ESV) But more than anything else, they are messengers. We see those heavenly messengers announcing God’s good news again and again in Scripture. In our first lesson today we have the angels praising God in the presence of all the saints. I think they also join in that great declaration of the saints: *“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”* (Revelation 7:10, ESV) At the birth of Christ, the angels declare the joyous news of the Saviour, who comes to save us. They are there at the tomb, assuring God’s people that the Lord is risen. They comfort the disciples as Jesus ascends into heaven, assuring them: *“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”* (Acts 1:11, ESV)

Angels are messengers. The message they share can be one of judgement, but more often we see them assuring God’s people of the Lord’s great plans and work. They are never ashamed of the words they are sent to declare. They do it boldly, joyously and powerfully. That is why I say, “C’mon. Be an angel. Be a messenger as you speak of Jesus and your faith and hope before the world.

It all starts with the faith that you have in your heart. Peter says to us: *“but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy”*.

What does Jesus mean to you? Is He your Saviour, or is He just a nice guy, an example of how we can be caring in our relationship with other people? Is He the Lord, as Peter calls Him? Does He guide and direct your life, or is He a casual acquaintance whom you turn to when you don't know who else you can trust?

I don't think that I've ever met anyone who has fallen madly, passionately in love who isn't eager to tell everyone about the love of their life. When people look at them, and wonder, "what's with you?", it seems so easy for that young man or young woman—and even for the not so young—to declare, "I'm in love with the greatest girl in the world! Her name is Brenda!" But we shrink away when it comes to speaking of Jesus. We think that someone like St. Paul or Billy Graham can just talk about Jesus all the time, but we think, "that's great for Paul. But I'm no great speaker. I'm not trained and educated enough to speak with eloquence. I don't have the ability to sway others. I'm too shy. I'm afraid. I just don't know what to say."

Sorry, folks. Peter doesn't give you an opportunity to opt out. He simply says, in no uncertain terms: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

Peter talks about our giving an intelligent answer when people ask us about the hope that is in us. Scripture tell us: *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver."* (Proverbs 25:11, ESV) But it doesn't take four years of seminary education or a doctoral degree in theology before we can speak of our faith. All it takes is the joy that is ours because we are the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Our answer is seasoned by our lives in the Lord, who rules in our hearts. Our hope comes from the marvellous change our God has worked in our lives. We are blessed through the faith the Spirit gives us to know that *"God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved"* (Ephesians 2:4–5, ESV). That is our hope: the hope of our forgiveness, even though we are totally unworthy of such forgiveness. It's the hope of life, even though we deserve only death. We believe in the Saviour who gave Himself in our place on the cross. We are sure and confident that He lives and we will live in Him. We hold Him in our heart, living under His grace and mercy each and every day.

That hope in our hearts should be evident to the people around us because of the difference it makes in our life. Before you ever say a word, people should be able to see that there is something different in your heart and life. When God's children are in the hospital or the funeral home, we react differently because of the hope that is in us. When we are doing our jobs, we do them as those who are working for the Lord, who blesses us day by day. When we are confronted with the struggles of life we face them as those who know the resurrected Christ has already overcome the world. Our caring attitudes, our words, our loving service to others should all speak of the hope that is in us through the Saviour, who fills our hearts with His glory.

Peter says we are to *always [be] prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.* If Christ is evident in your life, people will notice. They will ask what makes you different. When they ask, we need to be ready to answer. The word for *defence* in Greek is *apologia*. Our English word "apology", comes from the same word, but the meaning has softened over the years. We think of an apology as being sorry for something we say or do. That's not the biblical idea. We don't apologize for our faith. We aren't sorry for what we believe. We rejoice in the good news that has been given to us. We thank God that, in spite of our sins, He has saved us by giving Jesus to die in our place and to rise again for us. And so we speak up. We share what matters to us. Of course, we always do it in the best, most loving way. My grandmother always taught us that if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. Peter urges us to speak out, but he does tell us: *yet do it with gentleness and respect.* We don't have to ram our faith down someone's throat, but we also don't want to hide our faith away from the world. We speak out when the opportunity presents itself, thankful for the life we have as God's children, through Jesus Christ.

We also need to be aware of the opportunities that aren't quite so evident. When we enjoy a lively discussion with our friends over the events taking place in the world, do we take those opportunities to point to God's help and strength at work in our lives? When something wonderful or miraculous happens, such as walking away from a car crash that could have been fatal, do we say something like, "Oh, wasn't that lucky!" Or do we acknowledge God's grace with a simple comment like, "I thank God that He was watching over me and got me through all this". Do we offer to pray—and then actually pray with people who are troubled, ill, or overwhelmed by life? People need the Gospel, and we are the messengers—the angels—that God uses to get that Gospel to those around us.

In a few minutes we are going to remember the faithful who have gone before us. As we do, we will sing, *"For all the saints who from their labours rest, Who Thee by faith before the world confessed.* (LSB 677, st. 1) Over the centuries the saints of God confessed their faith in the dying and rising Christ. No, not everyone was swayed by their message. But some heard and through the power of the Holy Spirit, believed. Through their witness the faith was passed on from generation to generation. We can

thank God for them, for their testimony of the faith that was in their hearts has brought that joyous news to us today. They were, in a sense, angels. They were the messengers God used to bring us to faith.

Now Peter calls you to share the good news. C'mon, be an angel! Peter knew firsthand that giving answer for the hope in our hearts isn't always easy. But like God's heavenly messengers, we speak lovingly, patiently and faithfully of the Christ who loved us. Not everyone will listen, but the Spirit is at work where the Gospel is spoken, and by His grace, there will be those who believe that Jesus died and rose for them, and they will live through faith in Him. Amen.