

**1 Peter 3:15-16**

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C, Proper 18) Rally Day

**Lessons for the Day: Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Philemon 1–21; Luke 14:25–35**

**Ready. Willing. Able.**

September 8, 2019

*“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense 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 behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

In 1882, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used the phrase, “God is dead” to express his idea that the Enlightenment had eliminated the possibility of the existence of God. I’m sure that Nietzsche wasn’t the first one to feel that way. We definitely know he was not the last. For those who accept the “Death of God” theology, it is clear that the Christian God if He did exist at one point, has ceased to exist.

What is it that leads people to believe that God doesn’t exist? One pastor received a note from someone who had read a sermon online. The note said, “I’ve become a very angry believer, I look all around and see only Satan taking over this world. Just once I want to see God do a mighty thing. It’s like he isn’t here anymore.” After the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, people asked, “where was God?” When we see the devastation in the Bahamas, we will hear people ask, “where was God?” With the war and bloodshed, the natural disasters and disease all around us we may wonder, “where are you, God?”

Let’s be clear: God is not dead. He is not absent from the world that He has created. In fact, the world continues to exist only because God sustains it. The Scriptures declare that Christ *“is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”* (Hebrews 1:3, ESV) God isn’t unaware of the problems and cares and troubles that we face. He is at work in ways that we often do not see. He has already blessed us with a glorious life beyond description, even though it is a life we don’t deserve. In Jesus Christ, God reveals His love, His power and His grace for us in coming into this world of sin and death, taking on our human nature, that He might give Himself as the sacrifice which sets us free. Peter starts his letter with a great word of encouragement: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”* (1 Peter 1:3–5, ESV) God is not dead! God is alive, and we live through Him and will live with Him in glory forever.

Yet it is hard to remember that in the midst of a world that far too readily defaults to a misguided belief that God is dead. We, as the people of God, are often challenged by the social pressure the world exerts against us as believers. We know that the LGBTQ movement is opposed to God’s will, but to the world that makes us intolerant, ignorant, and even unloving. We don’t think life should be ended by a doctor when a pregnancy is inconvenient, or when health is declining. Yet these views also make us outcasts in the minds of many, because we just don’t get what it is to care for others. We don’t believe that we’re all free to do whatever we please, as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else. We do believe that God has a design for sex, and that it is expressed in the rightful use of marriage. We do believe that God alone has the authority over life, and that He values it in ways our world cannot and will not accept. We do believe that He created all that is, and that He does expect us to use His gifts in this world wisely, for our good and for the good of others. We do believe in the 10 Commandments—not the 10 suggestions. We do believe in a God who was, who is and who always will be, and that He is above all power, rule and authority in this world.

Yes, that leaves us in conflict with the world. At the very least, we may feel that we are always on the defensive as Christians. Many feel so overwhelmed by the social pressure exerted against believers that they lose their faith. When they encounter opposition to their faith from their friends, their colleagues, or the social set they aspire to, instead of holding on to or contending for their faith, they give it up.

Peter knew that the faithful of his day faced that same challenge. It is a very real challenge for our day, and especially for our young people. That is why Peter says to us: *“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you”*. We need to be equipped to give answer. We need to be strong in the faith that we have in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Our world has definitely changed. The church doesn't hold the position of respect and honour it once did. I don't think we could honestly ever say that Canada was a Christian country, but it was a country with many Christians, and those Christians were not viewed as an evil, but an asset. Unfortunately, year after year we are becoming more secularized. That has led many Christians to question their faith and to fall away, not because they don't know what the Bible says about sin, death, forgiveness and salvation, but because they don't want to feel out of touch with their friends or with the world around them.

Pastor Eric and I were looking at some of his thoughts and ideas he has for the next National Youth Gathering in 2021. He is working on an idea for a theme based on Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, where Jesus speaks of our being in the world, but not of the world. What a timely and necessary topic this is! We need to be ready for the challenge of living in this fallen world, because we aren't of that world. Peter is saying that to us today as well. His words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, remind us of why we hold this Rally Day observance. It is more than just a nice way to kick off the fall season, and the new year of Sunday School and bible studies. It is an encouragement for us to grow that we may be ready, willing and able to speak of the hope that is within us. And this, my dear friends, is why we put such an emphasis on our Sunday School, on the need for Confirmation, and our encouragement for each and every one of us to be in the Word in worship together, in devotion and bible study.

Peter calls us to *always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*. He even tells us where we start in that preparation: *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy*. To honour Christ as holy is to know and trust in the miracle of His grace—that the Eternal Son of God descended from His throne in heaven to live among us in our human flesh and blood, that He may fulfill His own law for us; and then offer His life in our place, suffering the punishment that our sin deserves on the cross. It means knowing we are sinners, who can't do anything to save ourselves. Honouring Christ as holy is to know that He has forgiven us, that He lives to guide us in the new life we have in Him. With Christ as our Lord we are going to be set apart from the world. With Christ as our Lord, we won't always be able to agree with the world. In fact, people should be able to see that we are different, so that they even ask what it is that makes us what we are.

Being ready means knowing what we believe, teach, and confess according to God's Word. That is why we want to teach our children in Sunday School. That is why our learning the Word of God and His abiding truth are not a matter of a few classes, but a life-long journey. One of the world's greatest pianists, Vladimir Horowitz, is quoted as saying: "If I skip practice for one day, I notice. If I skip practice for two days, my wife notices. If I skip for three days, the audience notices." If you want to be ready, you need constant learning, practice, preparation. It needs to start with our children—and I do hope and pray that you, too, will pray for our students and their teachers so that they may be well founded in their faith. God does command His people: *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, ESV) In other words, be ready by knowing, by growing in, and by trusting in the Word that God has spoken. His truth will always—always—outshine every other truth and teaching in our world.

We also need to be willing. Lutheran Hour Ministries has been distributing a book on evangelism entitled, *The Reluctant Witness*. The foreword of the book notes: "The number one reason people told us they don't have more spiritual conversations is because 'religious conversations always seem to create tension or arguments.' Christians told us that when it comes to their faith in society today, they feel misunderstood (65%), persecuted (60%), marginalised (48%), silenced (46%) and afraid to speak up (47%)." We become reluctant because we are afraid of being embarrassed. We think we are going to be asked to prove that there is a God and we don't think we have the right words. Peter says: *always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone*. If we keep practising and preparing through our worship, through our study, and through our personal reading and devotion, we will find that we are more willing to speak up when people confront us about our faith.

Ready. Willing. Able. That is what Peter urges us to be. All Christians, and I think especially our young Christians, need to know what to expect when they confess this faith. Jesus tells us in the Gospel lesson today that we need to count the cost of discipleship. We need to understand the consequences we will face and we need to prepare to meet opposition with courage, strength, and grace. It is good to know how to counter the arguments of the world, but Peter says we do it with gentleness and respect towards others, *so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.*"

Here, in this congregation, through the faithful worship of God's people and through the various educational ministries of our church, we are strengthened for our witness to the world. We find support and care that helps us resist negative social pressure. Being part of a Christian community, having Christian friends and colleagues can make the disapproval of the world seem

irrelevant. And then, ready, willing, and able, we share the hope that is in us. Thankfully, we know that the Holy Spirit is at work when we speak God's Word, even in our often awkward, stumbling ways. It is the Spirit alone who can change hearts. As I've often said, you will never save anyone, but God may use you as His way of saving someone. With the assurance of faith that Christ gave Himself for you on the cross, and that He lives that you also may live, you will find yourself ready to give answer for your faith. With the assurance of the Spirit at work, you will be willing. And equipped through His Word, you can stand firm in the midst of this unbelieving generation—and who knows what great things God will do through even your witness! Amen.