**1 Peter 3:13-22 May 17, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

 Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson, 1 Peter chapter 3 here re-reading these words. “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard 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.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 The teacher scans the room, their eyes looking from student to student. They’ve asked a relatively easy to answer question, something that was from the assigned reading last night that all the students should have read, yet realistically the teacher knows that not everyone did the homework. As their eyes see looks of fear, looks of shock, looks of nervousness, there is one simple truth when it comes to teaching. The student who looks the teacher dead in the eyes, has made a defense. They know the answer, or at least they think they do. They have something prepared, and have thought about what to say if they were called upon. They aren’t nervous or shying away from the opportunity to show that they have an idea of what is going on, and what the lesson is about. The teacher sees them, acknowledges that they know the answer in their own mind, but then looks and finds another student. This student’s head is so low it’s practically on their desk. They have nothing prepared, they obviously didn’t do the assigned reading, and while others may have an idea of what to say if called upon this particular student has nothing. No defense, no answer, if they are called upon they will immediately be exposed. So their head is down, they don’t meet the teacher’s gaze, they are timid, nervous, and downright scared.

 So put yourself in the teacher’s shoes, for some you’ve been in this situation, and I don’t mean to drag you back into a scenario of the school year, especially when children sitting in classrooms seems like a foreign concept after so many months of being in lockdown. I simply tell you this story to show how much easier life is, when you know the answer. You’re the teacher, whom do you call on? Or here’s a better question, which student were you in school? I have to admit personally at times I was both students, at times confident and ready with my head high, meeting the teacher’s gaze as they scanned the room, and others hiding and with my eyes low, not looking up for anything, praying that we can move on from this section that I was supposed to prepare for.

 1 Peter 3:15 “But in your hearts regard 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.” Peter’s words cut to our very heart like a knife. Here is the responsibility of bearing the name of Christ, the identity of being God’s own child and going through this world not with our heads down in fear, but with our heads up to meet anyone’s gaze, who comes to us seeking an answer to the question of our faith. Are you prepared? Do you have an answer? I don’t think Peter is talking about a strictly academic answer to all of the dates and facts of the history of Christianity. Peter isn’t saying that you must study and know the date of the founding of the Lutheran Church, or that you have to know Martin Luther’, or other specific facts like how many parables there are, how many miracles, or even how many specific books of the Bible. While this information isn’t a bad thing to know or have, it’s not at the core of your faith. Which is what makes the defense so personal. Like going to an interview you can prepare in some ways for specifics about your past, but you can’t be 100% prepared with a written down response to every question. The defense comes from your heart, it appeals to how you truly see your faith, and that’s why it’s important. A verbal defense of your faith or why Christ is important in your life is one thing, but there is a reality to the fact that in many ways people see your answer and defense of the challenges of your faith and know that you are a Christian, not with your words, but by the love that you show to others, with the way that you treat other people, with the actions that you do, and even as Peter makes reference to, that if you give a verbal defense of your faith in a dialogue or debate with another person, that you do it with gentleness and respect.

 In looking at the world today we can see that the words of 1 Peter chapter 3 are specifically important in pointing out how two things have drastically and dramatically changed. One is that Christ himself is not regarded as holy, not in the eyes of secular society, and even not in the hearts of those who say that they are Christians. To blaspheme the name of Jesus Christ or use religious imagery for things like comedy and entertainment used to be a highly offensive thing. It was crossing a very serious line to make light of Jesus Christ, to take his name in vain, to make light of what He did on the cross, or even just to bring up God and mock him openly. Things have changed. God is not regarded as set apart and holy but instead the world drags any reference of the one and true Holy God through the mud. Nothing is off-limits in the name of comedy and entertainment and so Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, Peter or really any Biblical figure is fodder for jokes, mockery or any other disrespect for fun or just to tear down the Church.

 God isn’t regarded as holy, but also we as Christians fail to treat others when speaking to them about our faith with gentleness and respect. We fail to recognize the different context or background of those who may simply be trying to get information from us about our faith. Instead of engaging in a dialogue, we shut ourselves in and shut them out. We don’t want to have to defend or explain our faith again to someone who asks, we just want to be around friendly faces. Our defense becomes something as simple as “that’s just what I think, that’s just the way we do things, that’s just how it is”. Peter doesn’t condone those actions at all. The truth of the Gospel doesn’t rest in history of tradition, it rests in teaching, in understanding, in gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, treating others as you would wish to be treated. Some of the greatest stereotypes when it comes to the Church were born from a place of misinformation and misunderstanding. We are called to defend and explain why our faith is so important to us, to not put our heads down when someone is seeking the answer to a question or has a complaint, but too often we hide from the dialogue, we shuffle it away because we haven’t remained faithful to the Word of God. We are called to regard God as holy and set apart in our lives, and yet we lump our identity as Christians in the same category as loving a favorite sports team, or celebrity, or movie franchise and other inconsequential things. Instead of having a defense for our hope and why we are different, we hope no one notices. We hide in plain sight, head down, nervous sweat coming down from our heads. Just as a student would pray, “Please God don’t let me be called on today” We are faced with a chance to share our faith, or call others to the truth of the Gospel and we say “Please God don’t let them ask me what Church I belong to, or why I am a Christian.”

 The hope doesn’t come from us though, and neither do the words, instead we should rely upon what Christ speaks of in our Gospel lesson. “And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” When the student is sitting in fear it’s because they didn’t study the book, the teacher doesn’t want to know their own opinion they simply want to make sure that they have learned the material. When we give a defense for our hope it’s through the Holy Spirit, our words and opinions don’t matter, which is why it’s not about studying a pre-recorded answer, it’s about a true sign of the faith in our hearts, and the Holy Spirit speaking through us. The Holy Spirit is exactly what Jesus calls him a “helper” one who is there to assist and provide for us in the strengthening and maintenance of our faith . Faith hears the words and makes sense of what is said, it is through faith that we recognize how God is speaking to us through the Scriptures. Faith causes us to see how God is using us in our lives and in various vocations, faith calls for us to help those in need, call out to the lost, regard God as holy and set apart. Faith is the means by which we are connected to Christ which is why Peter goes so far as to say, “Baptism, which corresponds to this, meaning Christ’s suffering, now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”

 Baptism is the connection to faith and therefore the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, so that when you make a defense, regard God as holy, serve others and the Lord in your life you are doing it because Jesus has died and rose again for you. It is not your own work that brings about your salvation but the work of Christ and God himself, the Holy Spirit living in you. You show your faith in the things that you do, it’s as simple as that, which is why Peter is making a case to say that in the times of life when you are slandered and persecuted you should be glad, for you are doing good. You are serving the Lord. God isn’t punishing you in the hard times of life for the sin you have committed otherwise your entire life would be a living hell. There would be no moment of peace because we are constantly failing and sinning due to the sinful nature and flesh that we still remain in. But thanks be to God that we are saved, that the suffering of this world won’t last forever, that this virus won’t last forever, that our isolation from each other won’t last forever, that we are His own property and that we are saved through Baptism, the connection to His work of salvation on the cross and through the tomb.

 So keep your heads high. Look with confidence for the situations where you can defend and tell others about your faith. Don’t shy away from the vocations that you have been called to. Give thanks to God for the Holy Spirit, the helper, the one who has connected you to Christ through faith, and strengthen that faith every day in study, in prayer, in celebration and thanksgiving. Even through a screen, even as you don’t hear these words, but may just be reading them. Give thanks to the Lord and see how His Word guides and protects you on your way through life, as a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.