

Sixth Sunday in Easter + May 21, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
John 14:15-21

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Our reading today from 1 Peter 3 contains what is one of my favorite verses in all scripture:

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

This summarizes our work of evangelism in the world—not so much knocking on doors and approaching people spontaneously, but defending the hope of the gospel when it is attacked in any way, even indirectly. And remember, hope is not a wish, but a conviction about the largest matters of faith—that Jesus gives us eternal life, that we need no longer fear death because God in Christ conquered death in the Resurrection, and that as a result we are freed from the chains of death to live fully and love fully just as Jesus commands us. And the part about gentleness and reverence is key, because it tells us we’re not to fight back against attacks using similar weapons, but rather using the means of love, patience, gentleness, kindness, and all the fruits of the Spirit.

But what if we need help in making this defense? What if we feel that we can’t do it adequately on our own? I may have recently mentioned my rather assertive cousin and how, in our Easter phone call, she told me that Easter is really just about new beginnings, about things springing up from the earth. I did not have the courage to respond other than to say meekly, “Well, I don’t really agree.” Looking back, I can see that I needed help at that moment.

But if we need help? This question gives us the connection to today’s reading from John 14. I needed an advocate, just as Jesus knew the disciples were going to need another Advocate when he

ascended to his Father. In last week's Gospel reading, after telling them he must leave soon, he comforted them with words about how he will come to dwell in their hearts. This week he's giving them additional assurances of what is to come: They will receive another Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will be with them forever.

Back to the idea of us needing help with our defense of the truth of the gospel: In New Testament times, the Greek word for "Advocate," *Paraclete*, denoted a legal advocate working on behalf of an accused person, someone who could be counted on to make the right call because they know the full situation. We would understand that person is an attorney, one who provides evidence that holds up in court. Nowadays, when we hear about someone who is an "advocate," we might think of a Patient Advocate, that wonderful service now provided by many hospitals. These are people that patients and families can turn to for help in dealing with various problems that may arise during a hospital stay. Family members or friends do this as well—spending time in the room with the ailing person, watching over them, alerting nurses when something is wrong or needed, getting questions answered and thinking of new questions, taking notes during doctor visits, checking medications, and doing research on the Internet. Betsy told me that Gabby did exactly this for Nate in his last few days.

The point is that, especially in critical situations, we need help—we can't do it on our own. Thinking again of an advocate in the legal sense, how does it usually go when a defendant serves as their own attorney? Not very well. Here's a good example from a news clipping:

Colin Ferguson went on trial in 1996 for shooting six people to death on a Long Island, N.Y., commuter train. Ferguson insisted on representing himself. He claimed that a white gunman took his gun and started shooting. He questioned his own victims, some of whom identified him as the shooter. He was found guilty and sentenced to six consecutive life terms.

In fact, Abraham Lincoln, who had served as a barrister, which is a courtroom advocate, once said, "He who represents himself has a fool for a client."

The bottom line is that we need an advocate, a helper, to make our defense to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us. As we look toward Pentecost on June 4, marking the day the Holy Spirit was poured out onto the gathered disciples, we find Jesus here telling them that his Father is going to give them this very Advocate, who will be with them always. And what does the Holy Spirit do? The Spirit forms and enlivens the church, calls us into service, and moves us out into the world to be the hands, feet, eyes, ears, mouth, and heart of Christ. Many of you in your schooling or confirmation may have memorized Martin Luther's explanation of the three articles of Creed in his Small Catechism. So perhaps maybe you remember his explanation of the third article, on the Holy Spirit, which begins:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but instead the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, even as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith... And remember, because the Bible is a living book, Jesus is talking also to us, not only to the disciples. I've heard many people of faith testify, "I didn't know what to say, but the Holy Spirit gave me the words." So when Jesus tells us in today's Gospel reading that "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you," Jesus is talking about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the way we come to know Jesus. Through this Advocate we come to see our life in the world in a completely different way, as the Spirit empowers us to follow Jesus' commandment to love one another just as he loves us.

This sets us up for conflict, though, because as John writes, “the world neither sees the Holy Spirit nor knows him.” How do we confront those who assault others and attack our faith? I have occasionally wondered how I would respond to the writings of the late Christopher Hitchens. Among a long list of publications is his book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens thinks that the idea of a god is totalitarian and destroys individual freedom. In this book he claims that organized religion is “violent, irrational, intolerant, and that it supports racism, tribalism, and bigotry, But this book was a New York Times *best-seller* when it was published a decade ago. To those strongly influenced by this book, what do we have to say in defense of our faith?

I, myself, on my own, don’t know. But if we open our hearts to God, the Holy Spirit will give us the words and ways to respond. This gets at another reason we need this Advocate—to help us to overcome the doubts, the hesitations, and all the old sinful ways of pride and selfishness that still reside in us. These are overcome through forgiveness. Here we return to the last part of Martin Luther’s explanation of the Third Article: “Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers.” There’s no better expression of the role of this Advocate than these words of Luther that are in #743 in our hymnal:

Now to the Holy Spirit let us pray
for true faith, most needed on our way.
Guide us and defend us when life is ending
And our journey homeward is tending.
Lord, have mercy!

Transcendent comfort in our every need,
Help us neither scorn nor death to heed,
That we may not falter, nor courage fail us
When the foe shall taunt and assail us.
Lord, have mercy!

Amen.