

An Accounting of Faith

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
February 25, 2024 – Morning Worship on the 2nd Sunday of Lent
Text: 1 Peter 3:13-22

I begin this morning with a confession – a most appropriate thing to do on a Sunday in Lent. My confession is this: I confess that I really enjoy silly cat videos on Facebook – a lot. I also love Facebook memes, especially the kind that seem sort of targeted at a particular audience – like clergy and bible scholars for instance. One such meme I came across just this past week seems especially appropriate for this Sunday and so I share it with you now. It does not feature crazy cat videos but only words so I can actually share it now, confident you can still enjoy it. Here it is:

General Pauline Letter outline:

Grace.

I thank God for you.

Hold fast to the Gospel.

For the love of all things holy, stop being stupid.

Timothy says hi.

Now, I freely admit that to most folks that have never had to sit through one, or several, New Testament classes, this may not seem funny. At all. But to those of us who have agonized over the historical context, the word choice and placement in translation, the hermeneutical possibilities and limitations of any of the Epistles, or Letters, of the New Testament, this comment is side-splittingly funny. It's funny because it really is the basic outline of all the letters of the New Testament many of whom are assumed to have been written by Paul, or one of his students or associates. Even the letter we read this morning, 1 Peter, which is supposedly written by the Apostle Peter, follows this same basic format.

This letter, which purports to have been written by Peter, dates to the last quarter of the First Century, meaning it was written sometime after 75CE. It was written from the Christian community in Rome which we know because of the reference at the end of the letter to its coming from “the younger church in Babylon.” Babylon was how they referred to Rome. It is unlikely it was written by Peter himself for a lot of reasons, but it was very likely to have been written by someone whose primary connection to the faith was through Peter. Thus, Peter was a primary influence on this writer, and the reason this person is a Christian now in a position to write an epistle which became important for the other early Christians to hold on to. Writing the letter in the name of this mentor was common practice at this time, understood as a way of honoring the influence that person had on one’s faith.

One of the main emphases of this letter is to “encourage Christians going through difficult times due to the distinctiveness of their way of life.”¹ It also serves as a way to “witness to them the “true grace of God’ (5:12) [and] ... it exhorts readers to rejoice even in times of unjust trials and suffering.”² This focus is undoubtedly why this letter is included in the canon of Scripture but, not all parts of this letter – and many of the other epistles – are without problems. For example, as was typical of society in this period of time, women, generally but not always, are definitely assigned a subservient and second class place in the world which has had myriad negative consequences for women over the centuries up until today. But that is another sermon series for another time! Today our focus on this letter ascribed to Peter has to do with how it is that we are to live and

¹ David Cortes-Fuentes in the Commentary on 1 Peter in the Peoples Bible NRSV Edition. ©2009, Fortress Press, p. 1699-1700.

² Ibid.

practice our faith within a culture that can, and too often is, openly hostile to it. “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do good?” he asks, then continuing on, “But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.” Even if you do suffer for doing right, you are blessed. Easy to say, but not so easy to do, is it. But wait, there’s more! “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” Okay, that sounds a little promising but what exactly does it mean to “sanctify” Christ. How can we mere humans sanctify Christ? Well, it’s our active decision to have faith, to accept, to trust that Jesus is God’s Son that is sanctification. In essence, then, in our context today, it’s the mere choice to be here this morning to sing and pray and praise and study together that sanctifies Jesus. It is our actions every day as people who choose to follow Jesus that reveal to others that we claim Jesus as our own, whatever that may mean to each of us.

The author continues to clarify what he means here. He writes, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Always be ready to make an accounting to anyone who asks why you feel as you do about Jesus, about God. Wow. That’s quite the sentence when you stop to think about it. How many of us would be prepared to give an accounting of our relationship with Jesus, our faith in God, our trust in the Holy Spirit if someone stopped us on the street or in the grocery store to ask us about it? You may be thinking, well, that would never happen. Not to me! Maybe. Maybe not. We just never know. Maybe someone sees the cross necklace you wear and ask about it. Maybe they see you do something kind and unexpected, so much so, that they feel compelled to ask you why you did what they just saw you do. Here's the thing, if you are living your faith each day, instead of just professing it here on Sundays, people

should be able to differentiate you in some way from the society in which we live. And, they just might ask you about it.

This could happen, dear ones, because our society is decidedly not Christlike in any way shape or form so that those of us who truly try to follow Jesus do stick out. Why? Violence is on the rise everywhere as people of all ages seek to settle disputes with fists and guns and knives instead of conversation. Judging others by their differences from us – race, gender identity, economic status, religious identity, political identity, and immigration status – seeks only to divide us into warring factions instead of a cohesive whole of God’s beloved people. Worst of all, some of these divisions are promoted by folks who claim a particular religious identity, Christian or otherwise, mucking everything up even more.

We, ourselves and the other Christians we can be so quick to judge, we all forget the basic foundation of our faith. We forget that all of us – every single person you encounter today, up close or from a distance – every single person is beloved of God! Every. Single. Person. The simple truth is it’s become too easy to fall into the trap of thinking God may love everybody, but God really loves us best because of who we are and what we think about things. Nope. Not now. Not ever. God loves each and every person, without exception. Now that, dear ones, is really challenging to wrap our heads, and our hearts, around. God loves this person I fervently disagree with? How can that be? How can God love *that* person? I just don’t get it. Here’s the thing. You don’t need to “get it.” You just need to acknowledge that you are you and God is God and you are not God. God’s capacity for love is so far beyond anything we can even begin to imagine that it is literally beyond our ability to understand. That’s why we need to deepen our understanding of who and what God is, and what God is

not. How do we do that? Seems like an impossible task for anyone. You're right. It is. And that's why we have the church.

The church is where we learn what it means to be able to give an accounting of our faith to whomever might ask us. The church is where we learn what it means to still be blessed in the midst of suffering and fear and pain. The church is where we learn, and practice together, what it means to interact with others with kindness and gentleness, even when we're really upset about something that's happened because of that other person. The church is where we learn who Jesus was and who he is to us still today. The church is where we experience the Holy Spirit moving in our lives and the life of this church and see it for what it is.

The church, especially, is where we learn, where we experience, what it means to step way outside our personal comfort zones. It's a place where we can dare to dream big dreams, imagine new possibilities and believe that God is not finished with us yet. This was the task a group of us undertook yesterday as we gathered for our long anticipated Threshold Retreat. It was indeed an amazing day where 22 people of this congregation came together in prayer and allowed themselves to be energized by the Holy Spirit in ways I think surprised many of them. For those of you not familiar with the how or why of yesterday's Threshold Retreat, allow me to give you a little background. Last spring, I took it upon myself to do a little investigating of what resources and options might be available to us through the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ. Based upon those conversations, and some personal visits here with our church, the Conference staff informed me that they considered us to be what they called a "Threshold" church. Now, what does that mean? It means that we are clearly on the "threshold" of something in terms of our future together but what is still a bit out of

focus. What is clear is that we are not on the threshold of closure. We are a small but very vital church, already well on the road to continuing our growth in vitality and ministry. What does that mean? Well, that's what we gathered together yesterday to figure out. And it was an absolutely amazing day which far surpassed anything I hoped it would be.

The sheer depth and scope of what we discussed and dreamed and planned together is way beyond the scope of this or any sermon. But, rest assured you will be hearing a lot about the details in the weeks and months ahead. Each of the Boards and committees of the church came away from yesterday's gathering with a list of things to begin working on as we move forward into the future as this church. Every board's agendas for regular meetings will include a "threshold" conversation to keep track of progress being made on the task lists created. Church Council meetings will also include at least 15 minutes on every one of its agendas to hear and respond to updates on the progress we are making to become even more of the vital church we already know we are.

Rest assured, though, this was not some "pie in the sky" conversation. It was and will continue to be very much rooted in the realities of time, space and finances as we move forward. The difference now, I believe, is that we have reclaimed with renewed vigor the hope that is in us that this, our beloved church, is just at the beginning of making a difference in the lives of so many people here in our church and beyond our walls into the community. Where will we be in five years? In ten years? Only God knows that. But, as the inscription on the beautiful mug you all gave me as part of my Christmas gift this year makes abundantly clear: "Hope for the best. God is in the habit of giving in." Yes. Just yes. Amen.

