

A fellow I knew in Pennsylvania was fond of asking, “If you were tried in a court of law for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It’s a piercing, somewhat uncomfortable question. I have asked it of you before. I am asking it again. There were times in the early church when persecution was such that trials were not held but folks were definitely convicted for being Christian. And there is at least a hint of hostile persecution in 1 Peter but there is also a hint of something far less hostile as well that we read about in today’s passage.

*“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you: yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”* I prefer the RSV translation which says, *“Always be prepared..”* That’s probably just the Boy Scout in me – being prepared. Prepared for a defense, or in the Greek *apologia*, which is translated as defense, answer or reply. This is not so much about defending oneself in a hostile environment as it is answering or explaining when someone who asks why you are hopeful. Perhaps it comes in the midst of a bad situation or perhaps it comes because of a positive attitude. In this case, it’s not so much persecution as simple questioning by friends or neighbors or strangers for that matter of what they observe in you. And yes, people are watching whether we are aware of it or not.

There is an underlying assumption here in 1 Peter. The assumption is that someone has noticed the hope that is within you because it’s not just within you. Somehow you have let it out as well. And my question is this, “Are we living in such a way that anyone is asking such questions?”

I had someone ask me this question a little while back. He knew I was a clergyman and asked it something like this, “What is it that you see in the world that offers a means of hope?” I responded, “In the world? Nothing really. But I do have hope. Clearly this is the party line but I would say that Jesus Christ in the world working through others to bring them to belief in Him and His love and salvation is the only true hope there is in the world. But that’s not just the party line, it is my firm belief and therein lies my hope.”

You can tell from the tone of some of 1 Peter that there is persecution around but you can also hear that our natural ways of responding are not the way to act. Rather, the way to respond is with a godly character that is beyond us and can only be developed by walking with and growing with God in the Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit: the Advocate in the Gospel reading who will be with us forever.

This abiding theme from the Gospel reading for today is based in Holy Spirit presence with us always and our remaining intentionally connected. If you cut a branch from a plant, it’s dead! It may look alive for a while. Flowers may not wilt right away but it’s dead. If you graft it into another plant, it may live but by itself, it’s dead. No quality of life there! In fact, no life at all. So it is with us. If we do not stay connected with Jesus, we are dead spiritually. It’s really not about checking in on occasion or even as often as once a week. It’s about abiding, remaining connected. And in being thus connected, we take on the character of Him to whom we are connected.

I spoke last week about belonging. Belonging to Christ and in Christ and belonging to one another as the body of Christ. I talked about being in community the week before as well. It’s a theme God keeps bringing to my heart in this time when we are physically distanced from one another as a community. This Gospel reading is again about being in Christ and thus belonging in and to Jesus Christ. And once we do, we belong to each other even if it’s not stated, which it’s not today. Belonging. Being connected. Caring for one another. ALL GOOD and very important for us to do in ways that are just not face to face. Keep it up.

One of the things that was most impressive about the early church was the way church members loved and cared for one another. One of the early fathers quotes a non-believer who observes, “See how those Christians love one another!” The *unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, tender heart, and humble mind* that come in the verses just before today’s reading were obvious to others. It was different from what they saw elsewhere in society and so they asked about the hope that these Christians had within them.

Are you prepared? Prepared to give a defense, an answer, an explanation for the hope that is within you? It is our calling to be so prepared.

So, let me ask, “Are you living in Christ in such a way that anyone, anyone at all is asking about why you are different from the rest of society?” Or to state it differently, “If you were tried in a court of law for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” If so, keep on abiding with Him. If not, then it’s time to get re-connected with Jesus and His body in a way that His life flows through you so that others see you as not just a living being but as truly alive in the Spirit.

Amen