

"Accounting for Our Faith"
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter
Lectionary Year A
May 29, 2011

Texts: Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21
Dr. David T. Howeth

Some of you have heard me talk about my daughter, Stephanie, who is now thirty-one. The most notable attribute of hers is that she is grandson Henry's mother. It's all about the grandkids when they start coming along. But being the mother of Henry is not my daughter's only attribute, of course. Along with many others, she is an accountant, a CPA with Price Waterhouse.

I have to be honest and say I never could have imagined her falling in love with accounting, but she did. For me, accounting is something to be tolerated, not something to be enamored with. Even though accounting is something I have to do but never want to do, over the years I have come to admire and appreciate accountants a great deal. Accounting, whether we like it or not, is absolutely crucial for doing business of any kind in our world today.

It seems to me that according to the text for this morning from 1 Peter, accounting may not be something that is restricted entirely to the world of business. It may have something to do with matters of faith also, for the writer of 1 Peter tells us: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope [or faith] that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." On the basis of what this passage and our other ones for this morning say to us,

I want to ask three questions with respect to accounting and our faith.

The first question is this one: **Who might be asking for an accounting?** The text from 1 Peter suggests that *anyone* might demand an accounting from us for the faith we profess. I believe that this is true, and that we ought never to forget it. Anyone and everyone may be watching us, and whether we know it or not, we are being asked implicitly if not explicitly to give an accounting for our faith in Christ. Our neighbors are looking us over. Our co-workers are holding us accountable. The person who checks us out at the grocery store is probably checking out more than just our groceries. Your classmates at school may be trying to copy more than just your homework. We are being examined and evaluated with respect to our faith by the world around us all the time.

Nowhere is this more true than at home. Our children and grandchildren are asking us for an accounting of our faith. So we owe it to them above all others to be able to do as the text from 1 Peter instructs—to be ready always to explain why we have the hope we have, why we believe what we do, why we have the faith in God through Christ that we have.

I am convinced that the main reason we are experiencing what some social commentators refer to as a "moral drift" in our country is because of the sin of omission of the church and its members. The church has been lazy, primarily in that the church has not done effectively its job of developing our children's faith.

Worse yet, the church has lulled itself into thinking that other institutions can do that job for it. So for the last four decades we, as

Christians, have sat back and let the schools teach values, let the government legislate morality, and let the media instruct our children as to matters of faith and ethics. We have rationalized our sloth by believing that since we live in a Christian nation, a Christian region of the country, and a Christian community—our children would naturally pick up the Christian faith on their own from many different places without our having to teach it to them.

But folks, *that dog just won't hunt*. Please hear me when I say to you that if we want our children and our grandchildren to be disciples of Jesus Christ, *we, their parents and their grandparents, have to be disciples of Jesus Christ*. If we want our children to have faith, we must show them what faith looks like. If we want them to know and understand the Bible and the traditions of the Church, we have to know and understand and be able to articulate these things. If we want faith to be important to our children, it must be evident to them by the decisions and choices we make that it is important to us. If we want our children to be Christians, we must be ready to give them an accounting of *our* faith.

We owe our children and grandchildren the knowledge of the things we consider to be important in life, and what is more important than faith in God? It is important enough that we shouldn't leave it to others to teach it to our children. As we celebrated together just last Sunday the baptism of a child into our community of faith, we need to remind ourselves that faith development, like practically everything thing else, begins at home. So we who are parents, the spiritual leaders of our homes, should teach our children what it means to have faith by being

willing always—any time and anywhere—to give an accounting for the faith we have.

And the best way we can teach our children and grandchildren what it means to have faith happens to be the best way to teach everything else to them, by modeling it. We can give our children an accounting of the faith we profess by acting like followers of Jesus Christ at home, at work, and at play. As our Lord has said to us, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." We owe it to the Lord, and we owe it to our children to demonstrate our faith by living it out in joyful obedience to the commands of God in Christ.

So that is the first question we can ask concerning our faith and accounting: "Who might be asking for such an accounting of our faith?" The second question is this one: **What accounting principles should we use?** I don't know much about accounting, as I already have confessed, but I know enough to understand that there are principles that govern the practice of accounting. It is supposed to be done a certain way. Given that we are to be ready to provide to others an accounting of our faith, how do we go about doing that? How are we to communicate or demonstrate the faith we have? What principles of accounting are we to use in making a defense of the hope we have?

The text from 1 Peter suggests that there are two principles of accounting we may use. We are to account for our faith with gentleness and reverence. *I believe that the reverence is to be directed toward God, while the gentleness is to be directed toward other persons.* Notice that there is a balance called for here. What we say to others about God or what we do in front of others in the name of God needs to

be characterized by a reverence for God, but at one and the same time, what we say and do needs to be characterized by a gentleness toward others.

Unfortunately some of the witnessing to faith that goes on in our world does not exemplify this kind of balance. On the one hand, there is accounting for faith that is marked by genuine reverence for God but is not gentle at all with respect to the persons being witnessed to. For example, there are the congregation members of Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas who protest their anti-gay sentiments at the funerals of our service men and women coming home from Iraq or Afghanistan. In front of grieving family members of soldiers who have given their lives in the service of our country, these particular Christians feel that it is absolutely necessary to hold up signs that say such things as "God Hates Fags" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers".

These church members believe fervently that what they are doing is ultimately showing reverence to God, because they are convinced that the military deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan are God's punishment for our nation's tolerance of homosexuality and a sign that our country's destruction is imminent as a result. It certainly is a stretch for me to see this kind of behavior as reverence to the God I worship, but even if it is, it certainly is not the least bit gentle toward other people. Not at all. In fact, it is insensitive at best and cruel at worst.

Do you see what I am saying? The text from 1 Peter is telling us that the accounting we give of our faith must not only be reverent toward God, it must be gentle, that is to say, compassionate, caring, sensitive, responsive, and respectful toward other people's thoughts,

feelings, and rights.

At the same time we must be careful that we don't fall off the fence on the other side. We can be so concerned about being gentle in the sense of being non-confrontational, non-judgmental, and non-threatening, that we wind up not saying anything to anyone about our faith. We can act as though what we believe and what we stand for don't really matter much, and when we do that, we may be being gentle toward others, but we are not being reverent toward God.

An example of witnessing to faith with a balance of reverence and gentleness can be found in Paul's sermon to the Athenians, given to us in the passage from Acts. If you look at that sermon carefully you will see the kind of conviction Paul had with respect to his own faith in God, but you also will see the kind of sensitivity he had for the people of Athens and their religious viewpoint. Paul did not deny or dilute the gospel; rather, he defended his own faith with zeal and fervor. But Paul did so by meeting his audience where they were and being respectful of their position. He did not condemn them, and we wasn't even condescending toward them. Instead Paul shared with them his understanding of faith with both a reverence for God and a gentleness toward the people with whom he was sharing his faith. May we do likewise.

On the basis of these texts, there is one more question about accounting for our faith that can be asked, and it is this one: **Where do we go for help with our accounting?** Accounting is never an easy thing to do, even in matters of faith. Sometimes we need some assistance, so where do we go to get it? The answer is a simple one and is found in the text from John's Gospel. Jesus tells us that he will not leave us

orphaned. God gives to us another Advocate. We have a counselor, a helper to assist us with our accounting. As it turns out we have God's own CPA on our side, the Holy Spirit.

As is true with all aspects of our faith, God does not ask us to do our accounting for our faith all by ourselves. *God does not ever ask us to do anything without his help.* With the calling or the task always comes the empowerment, the ability, the enabling, the gifts and graces needed to perform the task and respond to the calling. The Holy Spirit helps us to be ready to give an accounting for our faith. The Spirit allows us to be aware of those to whom we need to be accountable, and the Spirit assists us in making our accounting in such a way as to be both reverent toward God and gentle toward other people. If we trust in the Spirit and rely on its guidance, the Spirit will help us with the accounting for our faith we may at any time and in any place be asked to give. With the Holy Spirit's assistance, *all of us* can do this accounting, whether we naturally are numbers crunchers or not.

Are you ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you? Are you prepared to give that accounting with reverence toward God and with gentleness toward others? Are you willing to rely on the Spirit to guide you in making your defense? I pray that you are. There's no deadline like April 15 hanging over your head to get this accounting completed. But there is also no time like the present to be ready to account for your faith.