

WHY ARE YOU HERE?



1 Peter 3:15 "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."

The author of 1 Peter encourages his listeners, those early first Christians, to always be ready to explain their faith to others, with gentleness and with reverence, and not with the righteous self-assurance that one hears from most Christians today, --- if you dare to ask them what they actually believe. And yet with church attendance precipitously declining these last many decades and a whole generation growing up as having no religion at all, perhaps we need to re-examine how we share our faith. Perhaps we need to try a new approach, the one suggested here by Peter, that we explain to others the hope that is within us, with gentleness and reverence.

So what would you say, what would you say if I asked you to explain the hope that is within you? For I fear that many would struggle to be able to adequately describe their faith; that most of us cannot articulate clearly what it is we believe exactly, or why we believe, or even what it is that draws us to church week after week. In this time of pandemic, why has it been so important for us to continue to hold services online when we cannot gather together at this time? Why don't we just all stay home until this is over? What does it mean to be the church in this time of isolation and pandemic? Why are we still here? Why are you watching this service online?

Is going to church only some childhood habit of ours that we never gave up? Is that why we are here? Or do we come to church only out of a sense of guilt or obligation? Are we just trying to fulfill the Fourth Commandment to "Keep the Sabbath Day Holy"? --- Or is there something more? Is it the fellowship of this congregation, is it the sense of family, of community, a sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves that draws us together week after week? Is that why we are here? We all need a sense of belonging. No man is an island unto himself. What is the pull of this congregation for you? How would you explain to a friend the hope that is within you?

Maybe it is the beauty of the worship here, the beauty of this building, or the wonderful music, or the challenging sermons? Is that why you are watching? For there is in humanity, I believe, an inherent longing to acknowledge in our lives that, that there is some force, some power, something greater than ourselves, that holds the world together, that gives our existence meaning, that creates life, and makes sense of death. Interestingly some form of religion has existed among every culture in every place at all times throughout history. There is some basic human need to acknowledge God's presence and power in our lives, such that for many of us, we long to gather together to acknowledge that reality, to worship God, and thus the services here at St. John's meet that need for us, satisfy our religious longings, encourage and maybe even inspire us in that haunting by a deep seated sense of awe and wonder in life. Is that why we are here?

Or maybe you come to hear the Scriptures. Maybe you watch this service to hear those ancient and powerful stories long held sacred by so many peoples for so many centuries, for millennia? Maybe you come to be taught or challenged by them? Perhaps you come here longing to learn more about your faith, about the history of the Christian Church, about what we believe --- that you bring your children here to learn the beloved stories that you learned as a child, stories that our culture values still. That's

why we have Adult classes and Lenten studies, although they are only sparsely attended; but they are there to aid us all in our Christian understanding, to aid all of us in that lifelong journey of education that all Christians should be involved in at all times. Is that why we are here?

Or do we simply come to feel a part of a group of dedicated people who are serving the poor and needy in the world, who care about this community, who want to make the world a better place for our children? Is that why we come? Are you coming here as a place to give back to the community, coming here as a place to serve those in need, to live out our Christians principles? Perhaps what draws us here week after week is a desire to be a part of all of that, to feel that we are contributing and making a difference in the world.

Or perhaps you just come here just for yourself, for your own personal and emotional and psychological needs. For some uninterrupted moments in your week, for some time to reflect and to think, a time to cry or to pray, or to light a candle for a friend, a time to be inspired or to hope. For many, St. John's may be the only quiet sanctuary of self-reflection that we have in our busy lives, a tranquil moment in the chaos of the world outside, a time and place simply to be still, to feel the closeness of God, to be at peace with the world.

But *whatever* it is that draws you here, and it may well be a combination of these or other factors, we all need to know what it is that draws us here. We all need to understand why we are here, you need to be able to put it into your words, so that we can share that part of ourselves with others, so that we can always be ready to make our defense to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us, with gentleness and reverence.

Why is it that before the pandemic, on Monday mornings at work, we are all so willing to talk about everything little thing that happened in our lives over the weekend, except what happens at church? We were more willing to go on and on about our families, the activities of our children, how our favorite sports team fared, and even to talk about our sex lives before we are willing to tell others about the mystery and wonder we experience in worship! We have GOT to get over that as Episcopalians, for the sake of others, for the sake of the world. I am not asking you to go stand on a street corner and preach to strangers! I am not asking you to self-righteously declare that we have all the answers, and to proselytize or to convert your friends. I am simply asking us all to be able to share our own stories and experiences and feelings about the church, about this congregation, with our friends and family members, to tell them

what it is that draws us back here again and again, to make a defense of the hope that is within us, with gentleness and reverence. Because if there is something that draws us here again and again, then that something will perhaps draw others as well, but only, only if they knew about it. And they will **only** know about what goes on here, if we talk about it to others.

We must be able to invite and encourage our friends, our family members, our neighbors, our colleagues at work, to come and experience what we have experienced here, without fear that we are trying to convince them of anything other than the joy of our own personal encounters here. So stop now, seriously, and think about your friends, about who amongst them are a part of a religious congregation and who is not. If you don't know, then ask them the simple question: 'do you have a church community?' It is an important question in this time of pandemic. That's not a threatening or prying question; that is a caring and concerned question, telling someone that they are welcome here if they wish. Everyone is welcome here. We have fun here. We learn stuff here. Come and experience the exciting things going on here! There is hope here! There is outreach to our community here! --- Church planters have discovered that 80% of the unchurched people in this country, and there are many, many unchurched people in our

communities, 80% of them say that they would go to the church if only someone invited them.

So do you know why you are here? Can you express it in words? Can you talk about what it feels like to be a part of this congregation? And have you told anyone lately? For as St. Peter reminds us, we must always be ready to make a defense of the hope that is within us, with gentleness and reverence. Amen.