

Sermon Text for October 27, 2019

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Joel 2:23-32, Acts 17:22-34

“What is apologetics?”

What a great day it is today with the Bible presentation taking place on Reformation Sunday, the Sunday that we as Protestants trace our spiritual heritage back to Martin Luther who emphasized the importance of Scripture as a standard in all of our faith and insisted that each person ought to have the freedom to read Scripture, because each person is able to have an intimate relationship with God. So, welcome to Reformation Sunday, and congratulations children and families as you extend this tradition of faith.

So these Bibles that we give out today are a continuation of our basic faith tenets. So today is 502 years since Luther posted his thesis on the church door, but for us today in this simple act we see a continuation of a faith that we have passed down for generations. There is nothing wrong with tradition. In fact, I tell people that our lives are journeys where along the way we may have been baptized RC, confirmed Presbyterian, and met Jesus personally as something else. Each step is important as long as it takes us closer to the Trinitarian God that we worship in Jesus Christ. You don't want any of those steps to take you away from faith, but each one closer.

But if you are an adult sitting out there and you still aren't really sure what you believe, today then might be especially helpful. We are going to talk about something that is apologetics. Apologetics comes from the Greek word apologia which means to defend. In Greek culture at a trial the prosecutor would deliver the kategoria, or the accusation or the charge, and the defense would be the apologia.

The Apostles Paul whom we have been studying and following as of late, in Acts 26:2 before the rulers of his time, King Agrippa, spoke about defending the Gospel and called it apologia, he made his defense of his faith. Same thing in both Philippians 1:7, and I Peter 3:15 you have Paul use the term apologia as he defends or explains the faith specifically within a context that is either hostile to or skeptical of, but never neutral to the faith.

So, what is the simple answer of what is apologetics from my perspective and from the perspective of the Scripture today? It is a defense of the Christian faith almost always within a cultural context that is either hostile or new to the Gospel. So why today? Is this just a fun intellectual exercise? Because we live in a time where less now than ever people are truly understanding what they believe and why they believe it. If we are able to at least understand

why we give out Bibles, why we hold central fundamental beliefs together, then other areas of our life and culture can begin to be sorted out as well.

Paul in our Scripture today explains the faith in which we believe on this Reformation Sunday.

READ SCRIPTURE

We had two pretty long Scripture readings this morning. Joel was picked because the part that reads that God will put out his Holy Spirit on all flesh is often used for Reformation Sunday in that God touches all peoples with His presence and wants to have a personal relationship with him. We also use it for Pentecost as we are reminded that the Holy Spirit is not able to be contained and pours out freely and liberally upon all people within this family. Each message is similar and each applies to our understanding that within our body, within our family, within this church that Paul calls the bride of Christ each person is equipped and able to serve God in any and all capacities. This is a very freeing message especially in light of the current controversy which is overtaking the more fundamentalist churches which don't allow women pastorates and where Beth Moore was told to stay home by a very influential Baptist pastor.

You see, on this Reformation Sunday we read that the Holy Spirit falls on both our sons and daughters, and within the Presbyterian Church we don't have the problem of trying to discern by gender who is called by God to do what. That isn't how God discerns our calling, not by gender, but by the Holy Spirit. I'm not going to wade into that issue because it is not our issue, we solidly stand on all people being called to minister equally.

But also within this Scripture in Joel you have a promise from God that all things one day will be restored. Joel tells us that God is in the process of creating all things new and so the promises that God give us is for a kingdom that he will instill. The hope which is in this promise: My people shall never be put to shame, mentioned twice, is wrapped up in the promise that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

Again, this is a counter message to what Luther heard and was the culture of the time that your actions and your indulgences made you right before God. Here Joel tells us if you just call on God, it is your faith, God's grace and God's promise which saves you. This promise, this future motivates us to a confidence wrapped up in what can be in Christ.

So, Joel provides us with a promise that as Christians, as people of faith we are able to rely upon for our future. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trust in your faith if you don't have a confidence that God is on your side. You can't really grasp the future or see God's hand in your

life leading to the future if you aren't really sure God is on your side and wants you to succeed and your family to be healthy and well adjusted. Joel provides a promise for the future which allows us to have confidence in God.

Paul in Acts finds himself having to speak about his faith in Athens, where we left him off last week. Paul was distressed because of the idols, spoke at length in the synagogues and the marketplace, and then was brought to the Areopagus in Athens. The Areopagus used to be the council of Athens, the ones in charge of the city 500 years before Paul is here in this Scripture. In the first century they were pretty much just responsible for the religious life of the city which makes sense since Paul is speaking before them and he seems to be speaking of foreign divinities. They would be the ones to check out Paul and makes sure that what he was saying wasn't a threat.

How does Paul speak about his faith in this context? First he does so humbly. He compliments them by lifting up that they are very religious and leave nothing to chance, especially since they have an idol to an unknown god. He doesn't condemn them as wrong, but rather takes what is familiar to them and expands upon it.

He addresses that which they all had in common. The philosophers of that day were able to see the gods in creation, so he addresses creation. Notice he doesn't quote Bible verses to them because they didn't consider the Scripture to have any authority. So in vs.24 and 25 Paul appeals to them and specifically to nature as saying that God created all things and gave life to all things.

Plato and Timaeus proclaimed that God was creator, so he is speaking their language. He didn't start with a foreign concept, but in fact supported the Greek thought. The quotes that he gives that we read come from Epimenide, Pandonium, Plato and Aratus all of whom were Stoics so who believed that life had order.

You see, Paul begins with a common denominator and engages them. At the heart of apologetics, a defense of the Gospel, there needs to be the church, like Paul, rather than standing back and pointing our fingers in righteous indignation should minister to their searching. He was able to engage with them while not backing down to them. So from the common denominator of creation Paul hopes to move them toward faith by the way of the natural world.

Today, too many people see growing grass and only understand cells dividing or gaze into the sky and see masses of matter and rumbling gas. Something else is needed. Eventually

the revelation of Jesus Christ has to be involved and the scandal of faith to reason and experience must be made plain.

Paul tries to take them to transformation once they have established the common ground as he speaks about the resurrection. The end result, the goal of apologetics, is not to establish the status quo, but rather to bring about transformation and new life. What we do here does not have as its goal anything which is created by human hands, but rather a person, a people that is renewed and given life. Our goal is not to create institutions but rather transform people.

Institutions help us, traditions lead and guide, churches are part of God's plans. Religiosity is not bad. It is not negative. But being religious and using religion as an idol, as a way to arrive at an end, using it as a means to an end, using the name of Jesus as if that then justifies whatever you do and whatever comes next, that is idolatry. The end of apologetics is not intellectual understanding, it is not unity, it is transformation.

The God whom we serve and profess remains a jealous God which is why Paul was distressed. The God who sent the Christ is a jealous deity without rivals, an exclusive lover who tolerates no competition – not money, not sex, not philosophical ideals, not love of country, not institutions. None of those idols does God allow. And he fiercely judges all idols made by hands or minds of people. God is the object of our apologetics.

So, you all are Christian apologists for the Christian faith grounded in the promises of Joel that God is on our side. God will overcome. Our voice is needed today because it is a voice of hope stripped of a cultural agenda which tries to stick to it like insulated foam. Faith ought to shape and transform, not uphold the status quo. We defend the faith not because it is in danger, but because it is worth sharing. God doesn't need us to protect him, or defend him from anything. Our desire to let people know about our faith ought to come from the joy that we have in the promise that God is on our side. Amen.