

“Accounting for Hope”

Matthew 28:16-20; I Peter 3:8-16a – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might live in hope, not fear, and know that you are with us always. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Do you know what hope and fear have in common? Obviously, one good answer to this question would be “not much!” Our reading from First Peter basically sets them up as opposites. “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,” the writer says, and then “Always be ready to make your ... accounting for the hope that is in you.” It would be fair to say that just as we say love is opposite of fear and casts fear out, hope is another opposite of fear, and dissolves it away.

But they do have this one thing in common: they are both contagious. Now that I've said it, I bet you know what I mean. When someone else is fearful, even if you didn't start out that way, it's hard not to start second-guessing your calm or confidence. But also, when someone else is hopeful, it revives us and helps us to see things differently, especially when we were worried or afraid. At least, in some cases, it does, but we'll come back to that later.

It's an interesting way to describe the Christian life, this thing First Peter says about being ready. If someone “demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you,” they must have noticed something about the way you're living your life.

Have you ever stopped to wonder if you're living in such a way that someone would

look at you and say, “That person is remarkably hopeful. I wonder why?” What would that even look like? To be clear, there are things we might confuse with hopefulness, like cheeriness or gregariousness or generosity, all things that also have their place within Christian life. But they’re not quite the same as hope. Hope is a quiet thing, but a powerful thing. I think one of the most common ways it is expressed isn’t noticeable unless you’re watching over a span of time; because hope is perhaps most evident through perseverance. Anyone can wish something; it’s when that wish is denied, repeatedly, and we keep persevering to make it happen that we’re living in hope.

But again, that’s not all there is to it. Someone could persevere on a quest for revenge, which would obviously not be about hope. So it’s not just that we persevere; it’s how we persevere. And here knowing fear as the antonym of hope helps, because we can turn to that other antonym we mentioned, love, for help. Perhaps we could say that living in hope is persevering in love. And they’re both the opposite of fear, because how could we do that if we weren’t confident that eventually love will triumph?

This is all very abstract, I know, but First Peter does point us in some more specific directions as well. Chances are not actually that high that someone is going to “demand from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” I wish they would, but probably they won’t. But there will be other opportunities, if we keep our eyes open to see them. So there are two other words that I want to highlight, so we can be

better prepared when these moments arise. “Always be ready,” it says, but “do it with gentleness and reverence.” Gentleness and reverence. As I thought about this concluding clause, I realized there’s a reason it has to include two words. We’re talking about an introduction here. Someone has asked about your hope, and so now you’re introducing them to your Hope. And, as First Peter notes, this works best if we do with gentleness and reverence. The gentleness is for the person we’re talking to – gratitude for their interest, respect for where they’re coming from, humility in recognizing that the way we understand faith may not work for them, awareness that they may have preconceived notions about church or even trauma from previous experiences with professed Christians. Only with gentleness can we connect with the part of that person that we might call their soul.

The reverence is for the Hope we’re introducing them to, that is, God. We do not need to be bashful or reticent about the fact that we’re people of faith. With that gentleness alongside us, we do not need to be anything other than reverent toward the Hope that guides and girds us. We must not downplay what our faith means to us, especially when trying to explain it to someone who doesn’t share it yet. We do not need to exaggerate, but we do need to give our faith – to give God, the respect they deserve.

The writer of First Peter implores us to have “love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” We are living in a moment when there is tremendous opportunity if we can get this balance right. You have heard me say that one of our

goals for this 75th anniversary year is to clarify who we are and what God is calling us to do at this point in our history. But beyond that, the point of that clarification is so that we can make that accounting for the hope that is within us, loudly and clearly, because there are those who need to hear it, even if they haven't dared to ask yet.

Over the past month or so, I've been working on the overhaul and update of our website, with the help of Pastor Tesa and the Elders. What's been most interesting about that is the feedback from our website developer. Without any prompting, she started telling me about the things she thought we should feature prominently on the home page – things like being an inclusive, welcoming community. Unfortunately, she understood that such an approach to Christianity stands out these days, and she wanted to help us spread the news about how we do things around here, so that people could learn there are alternatives to the hateful rhetoric that a lot of folks associated with “church” these days.

In conversation with the Elders last Sunday, we discussed how to reach those who have been abused or traumatized by past experiences with churches. We decided that we need to just address it head-on, acknowledging that such things happen and that we want to be a place of healing. Just a few days later, I had the chance to watch this happening in real time. I attended the raising of the Pride flag at La Mesa City Hall on Thursday. I was mostly just going as a sign of support, since the Pride flag is getting some push-back this year, in our community and around the County. But about halfway through the proceedings, a man showed up at the edge of the crowd

and started shouting things about abominations. He was invoking the name of our God and condemning people.

I had been planning to keep my mouth shut. In these days when some people are taking direct aim at our constitutional separation of church and state, I have grown increasingly reticent about throwing my weight “as a local pastor” around in civic spaces. And I said as much, after asking if I could share, because, as I noted, that bridge had already been crossed at that point. And what gave me hope about this situation is that when I did stand up and introduce myself as the pastor of Vista La Mesa Christian Church, that crowd applauded. This isn’t exciting because I desire to be a local celebrity. It’s exciting because it shows us that a crowd that no doubt includes many people who have been seriously hurt by people claiming the name of Christ can still be open to the church and grateful for voices that truly share Jesus’ love and affirmation. Our community is longing for proof that the church of Jesus Christ is really and truly grounded in compassion and hope and mercy. They are weary of voices trying to spread the contagion of fear.

Gentleness and reverence. A tender heart and a humble mind. But be ready, always be ready. We must continue to clarify who God is calling us to be. We need to be able to articulate what it means to be people living in hope in this moment in history. We need to be able to explain why love must be the standard by which every decision is measured. But then we need to actually make that accounting; we need to stand up and be counted. We need to live into our calling and reputation to be the

church that welcomes all God's children to the table. With gentleness and reverence. Without being afraid of those who see Jesus differently or intimidated by the cultural expectation of secularism that often stifles our expressions of faith. When we truly live out our faith with gentleness and reverence, as opposed to arrogance and domination, we invite others to be more fully and truly exactly who they are, and God's heart is made glad. Hope is contagious. It's carried by words and actions. It's carried by showing up and speaking out. Let us be ready. Hallelujah and Amen.