

What Would I Say Acts 17:22-31 & 1 Peter 3:3-16

What interesting words we have heard from Paul and Peter. Now, lest some get confused, we are not talking about Paul McCartney and Peter Best - two of the original pre-Ringo Beatles. You knew that, we are talking about two of the original and most influential disciples of the early Church. Peter, originally named Simon, who the Gospels tell us is a fisherman who becomes one of Jesus' closest disciples, and one of the primary leader of the Church in Jerusalem. And Paul, who never met Jesus before the crucifixion, but who, while persecuting the "heretical" followers of Jesus, has an encounter on the Damascus Road with the risen Christ and goes on to become the most influential Apostle in Asia and Europe.

These two were so different from one another. Peter was an illiterate peasant from Galilee who, in spite of tradition, probably never left what is now a small area from Israel to Turkey. Paul, the son of a Roman citizen and a Jewish Mother, grew up in the Sophisticated city of Tarsus, spoke many languages and travelled much of the Roman world. Paul had both a Hebrew name, "Saul" and a Roman name, "Paul." Which one he used depending on with whom he was conversing. Writings attributed to Paul (and certainly much is actually from him) makes up almost a third of the New Testament; the largest amount by any single author - (Luke the writer of Luke and Acts is 2nd- 28%) The writings attributed to Peter (which were not written by him because they could not have been written any earlier than 90 CE) make up less than 3%. Ironically, for the earliest Jewish followers of the way, Peter is a major figure, and Paul is legitimized only because Peter and the Church in Jerusalem authorizes him to bring the Good New to the Gentiles. Peter and Paul knocked heads a little about whether Gentiles had to become Jews to be followers of the Way, but they figure it out. But as the church slowly becomes dominated by Gentiles, non-Jews, Paul becomes more important.

In spite of their disagreements and differences on many things., these two men agree on one important thing. They both compel us to be able- with creativity and gentleness - to talk about God's love and the power of Christ's resurrection. Perhaps that

is the genius of the early church. Even these two polar opposites follow the way of Jesus in bringing love and truth and hope in clear, pertinent, and short sermons and conversations. The writer of 1st Peter tells us this, and Paul, in his sermon in the Book of Acts, illustrates it. And notice that Paul starts by giving the Athenians credit for their spiritual vigor and even quotes two Greek thinkers from 300 and 600 BCE respectively. His learning is evident, but also his willingness to speak to the Athenians in their own language.. building on their own heritage, not belittling them, or suggesting they are wrong, or evil, or sinful.... Indeed he tries to convince them that Christ can add to and fill in the gaps in their spirituality.

Now, Paul is not always so gentle with his audience, and he often gets into big trouble; shouted down or jailed for his actions. But in this case his encouraging sermon leads some to become believers, and others to want to hear more. This is a key We don't have to be bombastic or confront people. As we think about Jesus, his sermons were encouraging and healing, oh, now and then Jesus confronts the religious leaders with words of judgment, but he is not that way when dealing with regular folks.

So if we are to be ready to tell people about our faith, what would you say, what would I say, if someone asked, "I see you go to Faith Church... Why?" Or perhaps, "You always seem so upbeat, things don't get you down... how do you do that?" What would we say? Those of us who grew up in traditions that encouraged us to witness about Jesus whenever possible might get nervous at the thought of sharing our faith, but Peter is not talking about preaching in the street (Paul is, but that is Paul - and not many are called to be like Paul..). No, Peter, the regular working guy, is not asking us to beat the bushes for converts, but to be ready to "give anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; with gentleness and reverence."

How many of you have you heard the phrase "elevator speech" in recent years. An elevator speech is defined as "a clear, brief message or "commercial" about you. It communicates who you are, what you're looking for, and how you can benefit a company or organization. It's typically about 30 seconds, the time it takes people to ride from the

top to the bottom of a building in an elevator.” As you probably deduced it is most often used in reference to people looking for jobs. But what if we worked on an elevator speech of faith and hope. It is in us. There is a reason or many reasons we come here to pray and sing and be with one another on Sunday and in times of joy and sorrow. Can we put it into words? It doesn't have to be a poetic or a great treatise, just a 30 second elevator speech.

Yesterday I was reminded why preparing such a statement is important. I was walking our dog Jane in a park in Palmetto when a man driving by opened his window and asked if I knew a good place to park as he was going to an event there. Caught off guard, I sputtered, and finally made a suggestion that there was shaded parking on the streets behind the park or I finally notice and pointed to a parking spot that , though quite sunny, was about half way down the block where he parked. “Well,” you say, “sounds like you helped him, what is the problem.” Here is the problem. I was so surprised by his question that I completely forgot that not 20 feet in front of where I stood and talked to him was a lovely shaded parking spot. I knew this because it was right behind the lovely shaded parking spot where I had parked with great intention to avoid the heat not 10 minutes earlier. The perfect parking spot for this gentleman was right there. Right in front of me, but I forgot And so I realized that if someone asks me a question about my faith or hope or joy, If I have not prepared an elevator speech, I will panic and most likely sputter and forget something very important that might really help the other person. Perhaps you don't lose your wits when surprised by a question, but as for me, I know I need an elevator speech.

To help us I have gathered just a few statements from some very smart and spiritual people. Two are scientists, one of whom is a non-believer, but all give us examples of ways we might put together our elevator speech:

Albert Einstein says, "My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind."

The Dalai Lama, puts it this way: "My call for a spiritual revolution is ...not a call for a religious revolution. Nor is it a reference to a way of life that is somehow other-worldly, still less to something magical or mysterious. Rather, it is a call for a radical re-orientation away from our habitual preoccupation with self towards concern for the wider community of beings with whom we are connected, and for conduct which recognizes others' interests alongside our own."

Neil deGrasse Tyson writes, "For me, I am driven by two main philosophies: know more today about the world than I knew yesterday and lessen the suffering of others. You'd be surprised how far that gets you."

Rev. Dr. MLK, Jr said, "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

And finally, the elevator speech i put together in about 20 minutes in preparing for this sermon: "At the worst times in my life, God has received my anger and my failures and my fears and offered a path to healing. A path shown to me by people of faith who held me, and forgave me and showed me God's love. A path blazed by Jesus when he overcame a cruel death - the worst possible human experience, with love and life. I have experienced healing in the story of faith taught me by my sisters and brothers in the human family. At the best times, God has filled me with awe at the beautiful, amazing gift of life. This awe is the foundation of joy - a deep understanding of God's love for me, too deep to be totally forgotten. It is because of these: healing and joy, that I continue to follow the way of Jesus.

I hope these examples are helpful, but know that your story, your elevator speech should be uniquely yours. God has done marvelous things in your life. God has done

marvelous things in your life. God has done amazing and marvelous things in your life. How would you tell someone about it? AMEN

1 Peter 3:13-16

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood.. and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

"Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has

overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."