

**THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU**  
*Sermon for Easter 6A- 1Peter 3:13-22*  
LPC, 5/21/17

Most of you know that I was gone for part of last week to participate in the commencement exercises of Virginia Theological Seminary and be officially awarded the degree of Doctor of Ministry. Though the title of doctor was officially awarded when I completed my defense back in March, the reality didn't really sink in until the ceremony itself last Thursday.

Incidentally, this is a good example of why we have rituals and ceremonies: so that important but complex life stages can be acknowledged and assimilated. It makes excellent psychological sense to observe rituals, and in the Episcopal Church we really do ceremony well.

Along with ceremony comes symbols, and I now have several symbols at my disposal to attest to my new status: A diploma, my name in the Washington Post (listed among all the 2017 graduates of Virginia Seminary,) and the right to wear a particular academic hood and an academic gown with three velvet stripes on each sleeve, although I only rented these for the ceremony and will have rent again if I ever want to go about in them.

The crowning achievement (and principal headache) of my doctoral work was my thesis. (Doctoral papers are called theses at Virginia Seminary, not dissertations, although the reason for this has never been explained to me.) The thesis is so integral to the awarding of the doctorate that each candidate's thesis title is proclaimed when he or she crosses the stage to receive the diploma and other emblems of achievement.

My thesis title is *How Nurturing Spiritual Practice Builds Spiritual Confidence*. You will shortly be able to read this paper in a bound format if you check it out of my seminary library. As most of you know, my thesis was based on an extended project conducted here at Lawrencefield called Friends of St. Lawrence. A total of eleven parishioners participated in this project over Advent of 2015 and Lent of 2016.

The project took the form of workbooks of daily spiritual exercises and weekly meetings with the rest of the group. Participants were introduced to various types of prayer and meditation and encouraged to share their experiences. The result was a dramatic increase in what I came to call spiritual confidence: the ability to articulate matters of deepest concern with accuracy, honesty, fluency and assurance.

I believe that the people who participated in Friends of St. Lawrence can now do what Peter describes in his first letter, of which we just heard an excerpt. I believe that they are ready to make their defense to anyone who would demand from them an accounting for the hope that is in them

Now, this Peter was writing to early Christians, probably in Asia Minor, who were beginning to suffer persecution because of their belief in Jesus Christ. Peter is offering assurance and encouragement and advice. He seems to be saying: know what you will say if you are challenged in your faith. Do not return anger for anger, rudeness for rudeness, hatefulness for hatefulness. Make your defense (and the Greek word here is *απολογία*, *apologia*, meaning

exposition of a case or argument) with gentleness and reverence. In other words, defend your faith but do not sin. But decide what you would say if you are challenged, before you are challenged, so that in the event you are not misled by the temptation to give into reactive emotions such as fear, intimidation or anger.

This seems to me to be good advice, as applicable today as it was in the first Christian century.

I do not wish to represent that American Christians today are being persecuted in anything like the way first- and second- and third-century Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire. We are definitely not undergoing the hardships of Christians under communism, or under ISIS. Despite the inflammatory contentions of some people today, American Christians are not under attack: not from the secular Left, and not from anyone else in a way comparable to persecution of Christians in other times and places. ‘

However, being a faithful Christian in today’s climate is still challenging. In some ways being a Christian is more difficult in an environment where Christianity is the dominant religion. It is easy to become lazy about one’s faith in such a climate. These days, too, many Christians are not only challenged by pagans and rival religionist, but even by some of our own fellow Christians for not being Christian in the same way that they are.

Has anyone here ever been told that Episcopalians are not really Christian? I have. Usually this is because the Episcopal Church as an institution has refrained from condemning divorce, abortion, women’s ordination, or homosexuals. Or because we don’t require a born-again experience or believer’s baptism. Or my favorite, because we are not “Bible-based,” whatever that means.

From the other side, many non-Christians feel antipathy toward Christianity because of their perception that Christians are superstitious, quarrelsome, dogmatic, exclusive, intolerant, or just plain annoying.

Finally, there is the age-old challenge that every person trying to follow Christ in any place or time has found: our own self-absorption, self-protection and self-satisfaction. Christ tells us to love others as ourselves, but most of us consistently place our own interests above the needs of others. The greatest challenge to Christian living will almost always come from within.

Peter’s advice stands. Always be ready to make an apologia, a case, for your Christian faith. Know what you are going to say to those who would challenge you, or to the challenges that spring up from within your own ego. Account for the hope that is in you. Find your spiritual confidence. Even write down what you believe and why, so when someone asks you you can tell them. Or tell yourself when you need to

The church can help you do this. Ask any Friend of St. Lawrence. Or, as a last resort, your friendly neighborhood reverend doctor.