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Gentleness and Reverence

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Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22

Finish this sentence: "Keep your eyes on the _____." Keep your eyes on the ball. Keep your eyes on the road. Keep your eyes on the prize. Keep your eyes on the horizon. Keep your eyes on the goal. Keep your eyes on your own paper — or a variation: Keep your eyes on your own work. "Keep your eyes on the stars, and your feet on the ground," says Theodore Roosevelt — which is a non-sectarian version of what Peter is saying in this passage of Scripture: **Keep your eyes on Jesus Christ.**

You see, Peter knew, as well as anyone, that there **were** people who would harm Christians who were eager to do what is good. In his day, Christians were being harmed right and left — not because they were bad, but because they were good; not because they were living for themselves, but because they were living for Christ; not because they wanted their own way, but because they wanted the way of the Lord; not because they desired power, but because they desired to share the power of the Gospel with the people around them.

When one is engaged in such worthy and worthwhile pursuits, one will run headlong into forces that try to put a stop to it — those who either don't understand, or, more likely, those who get it, and want to get rid of what Christ is all about. There are those who feel that the only way to do that is to make people suffer for doing what is right. No wonder Peter says, "Don't be intimidated."

The fear here is that the forces that are opposed to what you believe might win through intimidation. They might scare you into keeping quiet. They might frighten you in such a way that you decide that doing nothing is better than being mistreated for doing something good. Don't let that happen, says Peter. Don't be intimidated. It is a call to boldness, isn't it? A call to bravery. A call to confidence in the Lord. A call that we are blessed to receive, and are blessed to share. So, whatever happens we can say:

"We acknowledge that there is no help but from God, and we rejoice that we are permitted to fly to Him."

That is a quotation from Pittsburgh's own Felix Brunot — from the family of Brunot's Island fame. Felix Reville Brunot (1820-1898) co-founded the Singer, Nimick and Co. steelworks. Felix was a director, and later president, of the Allegheny Valley Railway in the 1850s and 1860s. He fought in the Civil War. Brunot was a director of several other organizations, including the Allegheny Cemetery Association, Western Pennsylvania Hospital, Allegheny General Hospital, the Western University of Pennsylvania (Pitt), and the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. And he was a man of faith. How did he say that again?

"We acknowledge that there is no help but from God, and we rejoice that we are permitted to fly to Him."

Brunot said that on an occasion when people were trying to do good, in the name of Jesus. And other people were trying to intimidate them — when Christians were trying to work together, and people were trying to break them down. It happened in the Pittsburgh of not so long ago. It would be good if we could hold on to his observation — and put it to use in our lives — in the Pittsburgh of today.

"Don't be intimidated. Keep your eyes on Jesus Christ." When Peter wrote those words, he wrote to a Christian community that perhaps comprised less than one percent of the population. Christianity at this time was a suspect religion, from a backwater country in the Middle East. It found itself at odds with the prevailing culture and with the people who were all around. Christians were an easy target for suspicion, ridicule, and blame if things were going wrong. They found themselves in positions of having to take a stand for what they believed, and, when they did that, they did it at their own peril. Sometimes, at the risk of their very lives.

The first martyrs of the Church of Rome were Christians martyred in the city of Rome during Nero's persecution in AD 64. The event is recorded by both Tacitus and Pope Clement I. In July of AD 64, Rome was devastated by fire. Largely made up of wooden tenements, fire was a frequent occurrence in the city. Rumor blamed the tragedy on the unpopular emperor Nero, who wanted to enlarge his palace. He accused the Christians. According to the historian Tacitus, many Christians were put to death "not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind."

Not long after he wrote this letter, Peter himself would meet his life's end as a martyr, crucified on a site that is now the Clementine Chapel, which was then part of Emperor Nero's gardens. It is one of the two main untouched areas of Old St. Peter's Basilica, surviving from the earliest days of the Christian Church in Rome. Located just behind the central altar of St. Peter's Basilica, it holds a place relatively similar to our Chancel mosaic of Christ.

Pope Clement I (d. AD 99), in his Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 5), written circa AD 80–98, speaks of Peter's martyrdom in the following terms:

"Let us take the noble examples of our own generation. Through jealousy and envy the greatest and most just pillars of the Church were persecuted, and came even unto death. ... Peter, through unjust envy, endured not one or two but many labors, and at last, having delivered his testimony, departed unto the place of glory due to him."

Jerome (AD 327–420) wrote, "At Nero's hands Peter received the crown of martyrdom, being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised on high, asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord." Peter lived, and Peter died, according to his teaching in our Scripture passage: "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."

I believe that few of us will be called to make that kind of testimony — one that means life and death. Then again, as we speak of and honor our Lord — those are the words that lead to life. And inasmuch as we do not — that way is the way of death. It is, after all, a life-and-death situation. "Always be ready to make your defense"

Maybe another way of saying that is this: "As you think about your own story, where do you see God at work?" God is at work _____. (Fill in the blank.) God is at work when things feel hard. God is at work in your church. God is at work in your world. God is at work in each of us. God is at work in you. Cultivate a lifestyle of seeing where God is at work. Then tell it to others; make your defense. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

"Gentle words wield great power." Don't just take my word for that; you see, it is a direct quote from the Old Testament — from Proverbs. (See Proverbs 15:1 and 25:15). Calm demeanor, kind words, tender-heartedness — these can accomplish more than their opposites ever could — not only in the way of conversation and communication, but, more importantly, in the way of convincing and convicting others of the way of Christ. And is that not that the reason we are called to make our defense? To convince and convict others of the truth of the Gospel.

Peter also says to make our defense in all reverence. What is said, and what is done, needs to be said and done with deep reverence — with deep respect for that particular someone who has become all in all to you — that is, Jesus our Lord. So, what's the best way to revere Jesus? It is to share your blessings with the less fortunate. It is to develop a holy habit of reading Scripture and praying regularly. It is to find ways to give of your best to God. It is all of these.

As the genuine religious impulse becomes dominant, reverence more and more takes charge. As Evelyn Underhill puts it, " 'I come to seek God because I need Him,' may be an adequate formula for prayer. 'I come to adore God's splendor, and fling myself and all that I have at His feet,' is the only possible formula for worship, and for life."

The point of this passage seems to be that the hearers need not fear suffering, nor fear the powers that be. In our text, Peter counsels a very different response to persecution. Rather than focusing on your persecutors, and being overwhelmed by fear and hatred, keep your eyes somewhere else: "Keep your eyes on Christ." Amen.