

“I Still Believe: An Un-Apologetic Apology” by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

1st Peter 3.13-18

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Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats. Do not be shaken. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

Always be prepared to give a defense to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

For it is better to suffer for doing good (if it is God's will) than for doing evil.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

1st Peter 3.13-18
[New International Version, adapted]

This is my apology.

But I'm not sorry.

Of course, there are many things I am sorry for. That's why I need our Prayer of Confession every week, and my own less-formal confessions every day. I apologize all the time (probably not enough). But this apology is not one of those.

We just heard, in the reading Carole shared, this sentence: *“Always be prepared to give a defense to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”*

“Give a defense.” That translates a Greek word, *apologia*. You can easily see that's where we get “apology.” Strangely though, *apologia* isn't about apologizing. In an ancient Greek law court, the prosecution gave its case against you.¹ Then you gave your defense, your *apologia*, why you were not guilty. If you are not guilty, you do not need to say “Sorry.” So *apologia* means an answer, a defence.

Last Sunday, I talked about whether the United Church believes anything. I've been asked that a bit this summer. We didn't get into the details, but we did see that yes, the United Church has beliefs. And we take them very seriously. Now, you can be part of the church

¹ The prosecution's case was called a *kategoria*.

without believing anything; we don't have an entry exam. If you want to be a member of the church, with can include leading and making important decisions about our life together, we ask you believe some pretty basic Christian things. And I talked about what ministers have to believe.

What do ministers believe? Since there are about 3,000 of us, I can't really say. We're a pretty diverse church! All I can say is what I believe. That's what I offer you this morning, my un-apologetic *apologia*, my answer, my apology for why I trust God.

II

It starts with Jesus. He captivates me.

When I was starting to figure stuff out, a group of us were reading the Bible together. We were looking at the stories Jesus told, his parables. Jesus blew my mind. He challenged me. He made me think differently. He bugged me. He kept drawing me in, closer to him. He has not stopped.

I noticed Jesus was not intimidated by top-of-the-ladder people. He did not shy away from bottom-of-the-heap people. He had good news for everyone. Folks who were sure they were righteous, and those who knew they were not, Jesus had something good for all of them. For me too.

He struck me by how he was always giving himself. Finally, all the way to cruel death on a cross. He gave himself because of us and for us, forgiving and loving us (even the worst that is in us).

He refused to stay dead, though. If his resurrection really happened—and as I studied carefully, I grew convinced it had—if he is risen from the dead, then everything has changed. And everything I've just said about what he did long ago, he is still doing now.

I believe because of Jesus.

III

I think this needs to be carefully grounded. So I've immersed myself in study about the historic Jesus, including the meaning of his crucifixion and resurrection. And what people have said about him. I've read things that strengthened what I already thought, and things that challenged and changed me. I've dug deep into theologians, past and present. And explainers and defenders of the Christian faith. And people learning how we can follow Jesus in our world today.

The more I've studied, the more I've learned, the more I'm challenged, the stronger my trust in Jesus grows. I'm confident that those who first wrote about him, in the Bible, got him right. So we can build on what they saw and realized. My trust grows stronger.

IV

I'm seeing how it all fits.

The Bible tells it in all sorts of ways — poetry, sagas, stories, histories, letters, visions, and so on. These were compiled over centuries by a diversity of authors and editors. Yet, together this collection of writings tells the Story that is comprehensive and compelling.

It is the Story of a cosmos that is a creation, not a mistake. Everything is the Creator's gift, for God is good, generous, both mysterious and wanting to be known. God loves to love.

It is the Story of a world which we break, for we squander God's gifts and misuse the freedom God gives. The results are catastrophic and heartbreaking.

Yet God has never given up. It is the Story of God crafting and working through an unlikely people, Israel. Like the humanity which they represent, they have both achieved greatness and crashed in ruin.

Yet God never gives up, on them or any of us. It is the Story of God, unexpectedly and astonishingly, entering into the very creation, in all its wonder and decay, in person. In Jesus, God keeps God's word, fulfills God's promise, and rescues everything from destruction. With Jesus, the Story reaches its climax . . .

. . . but it is not finished. God continues to unfold it toward its fullness and completion, its wholeness and wellness.

In broad strokes, this Story is simple; it took me just a few minutes to tell it. In details, intricate. I find it strongly satisfying. With it, so much makes sense.

V

I also found so much wisdom at the heart of the Christian tradition. I mean the insights that folks have been mining, and forging, and hammering out since the earliest decades of the Christian movement. You could call it "Christian orthodoxy." I embrace an orthodoxy that is generous, open, and flexible, and still strong and grounded.

So I am a Trinitarian. The one, only God is also three: In traditional language, Father, Son, and Spirit. These three are in such love, such union, such intimacy, such agreement of purpose and identity of being, that their Three-ness does not detract from their One-ness, but instead deepens and strengthens it. At the heart of reality, the One who makes reality is a Community of love, of relationship.

I celebrate the fullness of Jesus — he fully human as we are; he is fully divine as God is.

Do I come close to fully understanding this? Nope. Yet as I climb higher into this wisdom, I find the light grows brighter, the air even fuller, and the view ever farther.

VI

Yet even on that mountain, the fog still rolls in. Discovery does not remove doubt, nor does faith exempt us from struggle. It might help us to struggle well.

I wrestle. Why such suffering? Suffering on huge scales: a tsunami or a refugee crisis? Suffering in small tragedies: a two-year-old and her dad murdered, walking with a friend through her cancer and coming death? I don't expect I will ever answer why. I'm not sure an answer would help. I do know God will. I will stand with you in the fog, feeling the wet on our cheek from tears, and wailing, knowing that God who went to a cross is standing with us. The Bible does not solve suffering. It gives us words to cry through it.

I wrestle. If only we could prove God exists. Christian faith is reasonable, but that only takes us so far when it comes to most important things. Like any vital relationship, it requires risk, the risk of entrusting myself to the One who is usually so elusive, at least for me. I don't think I'll ever be certain. Yet I have enough confidence to give myself into God.

VII

Finally, I believe all this because I know how it helps me to see.

I was reading an essay by C. S. Lewis, titled "Is Theology Poetry?"² It was actually a speech he gave to a philosophy club at Oxford University. He finished with this sentence:

*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen,
not only because I see it,
but because by it I see everything else.*

It's like you looked out the window this morning. You knew the day had dawned and the sun come up. You know this, even if your window faced west, and you could not see that blazing ball in the sky. You knew the sun was up, because by its light everything else was now visible and clear to your beholding.

Jesus, and all that I'm learning from him, and all I am discovering about him, and that great Story which he ties together, and the God whom he shows us — all of this casts light on everything else. And we see. Dimly. Never fully. Not for now. Yet still, we see. The mysteries of life and love; of science and society; of human achievement (why can we do so much?) and human awfulness (why do we do so much?); of daily triumphs and trials . . . the mysteries of you and me. Because of Jesus, I see better. That gives me one more reason to trust myself to him.

This is my apologia, my apology. It's not about me, though. It's about this One, whom I discovered (or, who discovered me). That's my prayer for all of us: to discover and be discovered in Him. Amen.

² It was actually a speech he gave to the Oxford University Socratic Club in 1944.
www.samizdat.gc.ca/arts/lit/Theology=Poetry_CSL.pdf