

“Standing Firm”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Psalm 66:16-20

New Testament lesson: 1 Peter 3:13-22

Here's a scenario for you:

You and a young man in his early 20s step into an elevator at the same time. You're both going to the 10th floor. He notices something that indicates that you're a Christian (maybe you're wearing a cross necklace, or he saw a sticker for your church on your car outside.) "I don't believe in God or anything like that," he says as the doors close. "Why are you a Christian?"

You have about 40 seconds to answer. What do you say? That's the question that writer Jennifer Fulwiler posted on her website for feedback from her followers. It's the classic "elevator speech" scenario. It's also the question Peter asked his readers in 1st century Asia Minor, where people of the Christian faith were few and far between and society didn't have much use for them.

Well, I don't know if you've noticed or not, but today people of faith are fewer and farther between in this country than ever before. And it sure seems sometimes like large segments of society have no use for us, the church though I beg to differ.

Amid all the uncertainties swirling around our government, religious faith and church life, the economy, healthcare, and the basic needs that you have on a day-to-day basis, we as Christians are called to stand firm in the faith. Scripture calls us to (quote), "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."

Today, during our sermon time, you will have an opportunity to think about your elevator speech when it comes to where you stand in this world. Please know that you don't have to necessarily give an elevator speech just because you think it through a bit. In fact, the overall purpose of Peter's letter to the early Christians was to give them the spiritual strength to make it through during a time when Christians were undervalued, belittled and persecuted.

So, the purpose of us working on our elevator speeches today is to give each of us a place to stand in the faith despite the overall decline in church membership in this country, if not also, the general disregard many people have when it comes to faith and religion. A lot of people just don't believe in God, or care about the church, or rely on Christ.

But we do. So we need a place to stand. Please take out the Sermon Worksheet insert from your bulletins. OK. First, each of you should pick a side to work on – either the side that says "The Rock on Which I Stand" or the side that says "Did You Know?"

The side that says “The Rock on Which I Stand” is for people who have come to faith or relate to their faith through a major life event, such as the death of a loved one, overcoming a health or financial crises, or turning your life around for one reason or another.

The other side that says “Did You Know?” is for people who have always had a strong faith in God and belief in Jesus Christ. These are people who grew up in the church, have just always been a believer, and/or have always attended church.

Let’s work on that side for the next few minutes. If that’s the side you’re working on, take your pen or pencil and where it says “My Goal,” jot down the No. 1 thing you hope to get out of your faith-life, whatever you’re feeling right now. Maybe it’s a sense of peace and security come what may, or taking joy in life as a child of God, or growing closer to God, being a better follower of Christ. Whatever it is for you, jot that down. While you’re doing that, let me talk to those who are using the other side real quick.

If you’re using the side titled “The Rock on Which I Stand,” I think you’ll find it pretty self-explanatory. We’re talking about a turning point or crises that really undergirds your faith and/or changed your life when it comes to believing in God and trusting in Jesus Christ.

As I continue helping those working with the “Did You Know?” side, please feel free to jot down some thoughts if you’re using the opposite side of the sheet. OK, all my “Did You Know? folks, where it says “What I Do,” put down whatever you might answer if someone were to ask you, “So, what do you do?” You might write down things like I work at (fill in the blank), or I volunteer in the community, or I’m a church volunteer, or I’m a mom or a grandmother of a very busy household – or dad or granddad, aunt or uncle. Whatever you might answer when asked “What do you do,” put that down on the sheet. Everybody have that. OK, good.

Now, under “Why My Faith Matters,” say something about how your faith helps you do what you do – like “helps me think of others when I make a business decision,” or “inspires me to give of myself for the sake of others,” or “gives me strength to keep the household running smoothly” – something like that.

Ready to move on? OK, where it says “My Question for You,” that’s something you won’t fill in right now. But it is an opportunity to leave the person with an open-ended question that shows you’re interested in their life, and in particular, what helps them make it through, day in and day out.

And then “Putting it All Together- whether you’re working on this side or the other-” that’s your opportunity either now or later to actually come up with an elevator speech that says exactly what your faith means to you and what you get out of it. Again, the point isn’t necessarily to give your elevator speech to someone you meet or someone you know, although I would encourage you to be open to opportunities to do so.

But the real power of developing the elevator speech is to give you the opportunity to think about the importance of your faith, and what it means to you. Just like this was critical to the people of Peter's time, it is critical for us amid all the change and uncertainty of our day and age.

When Peter's letter was written, the Roman government didn't care one bit about the faith of 1st century Christians -their values and morals. And when it got in the way of the Romans making money or fighting wars or living high on the hog, that's when they started killing Christians just for being Christian.

Peter's letter is designed to give them the strength, determination and confidence to survive, while keeping the faith. "Keep your conscience clear," says Peter, "so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good – if suffering should be God's will – than to suffer for doing evil."

What this means for us is that we need to keep the faith and know that the church will survive – and even thrive – long after the current downturn in church attendance and religious faith has reversed itself.

The Christians of Peter's time couldn't imagine Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, which is what happened under Emperor Constantine in the 5th century. They couldn't see five or six generations into the future, and neither can we. But we can see -and celebrate-what we have today.

First Presbyterian Church is blessed to have a vibrant, active ministry – Sunday worship, weekday Bible studies and small groups, Sunday school classes and our LOGOS program, fellowship and mission outreach. This will continue. We have the financial and spiritual resources to keep going for the foreseeable future and beyond.

As long as we remain clear about what we believe and what it means to our lives and our world, nothing can get in the way of the bright future God has in store for us. The elevator speeches you're working on are a great way for us to stand firm in the faith and share it with other. Let us close by listening to Peter's elevator speech, found in today's New Testament Reading.

Peter points to Christ as the center of our faith, when he says, "Christ ... suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit (He) has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him."

With Christ as the solid rock on which we stand, we don't have to worry about our lives, our church, or our future. And that is freeing. We are free – free of crippling worry, free of debilitating doubt and uncertainty, free of the fear of death, free to love all people as brothers and sisters in Christ, if they'll have us, free to share the faith with all who will listen, inviting them to come along side us, as together we discover and celebrate the joy, peace, hope and love of the Lord. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of all the ages, we have come together in your name today as your people, your children. It is in your name that we give thanks for the work you are doing in and through the life of each person here.

We pray for your comfort and peace, life and breath, hope and joy, especially for those facing the loss of loved ones, the struggle of illness and disease, and the uncertainty of an indifferent world.

We ask that you give us your strength, because we know that we are nothing without you, O God. Pour out your Spirit on your people so that they will know they are never apart from you.

Thank you for seeing, knowing and loving each person. May we experience your presence today, we pray, even as we raise up your prayer, in the name of the living Lord, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**