

Lectionary 25 + September 18, 2011

What do you stand for? Have you asked that to someone? Has someone asked the question of you? Perhaps you have asked the question to yourself. When we ask this question we usually mean something like this: What do you believe in? What are your core values? What are you passionate about? What will you go to the mat for or even stake your life on?

We stand for many things. You may stand for justice or peace or human rights or you may be passionate about a cause. As I look across this space I see folks who stand for many things and as I think about this, we *literally* stand for many things.

We stand to salute the flag or say the pledge of allegiance. We stand to make a point and may even use a soapbox to do so! We may stand in excitement to greet someone we've never before met or have not seen in a long time. Have you been in a court of law? What do people do when the judge, bedecked in a black robe enters the court? People stand. I've seen people leap to their feet at baseball games or basketball games to cheer on their team. I have also seen them stand to boo the opposition. Sometimes we will give people standing ovations. We stand for many reasons and for many people – out of respect or excitement or conviction or honor. We stand for much.

And here in church we stand! If you've been coming to worship for years, you know that we do a lot of standing and sitting and I've heard newcomers say, more than once, what do you stand for? Good question. *I think when and how we stand at particular times in the worship of God says something about what we stand for.* Today, let's take some time to explore one of these moments when we make it a point to stand: the reading of the Gospel.

Obviously, one of the things we do here in worship is listen to the Scripture or the Bible. Beyond merely listening to Scripture, we revere Scripture as God's Word. So we read from this beautifully bound book. Here are the scripture readings organized around each Sunday in the church year. By reading from this common book we say that the Bible belongs not just to you or me or any one individual, but to the entire community. Through the Scripture, God addresses a people, a community of faith. Through the Bible, God addresses not just individuals but a gathered community made by one by God's Spirit. We read from the Old Testament and then we respond to Scripture with scripture by praying together the Psalm. Then we read from the New Testament. We respond to each reading with the acclamation: *Thanks be to God.*

Then we welcome the Gospel by standing and singing. Usually we sing "Alleluia," a word that means "praise God." The Gospel is then read in our midst. Right here in the midst of the gathered community as way of saying that Christ is here, risen among us. Sometime the procession of the Gospel into the very center of the congregation is accompanied by a cross or torches or candles and even, once in a while, incense to revere this very word of God spoken among us. Last summer Britt and I visited a congregation in Chicago. When it came time for the reading of the Gospel, the ministers bearing the book and a large cross processed around the

perimeter of the worship space a couple of times before stopping to proclaim the Gospel lesson. A couple of years ago, I saw the Presiding Minister at another service of worship dance while holding up the Gospel before he read it. (Don't worry, I won't do that!)

So, when the Gospel is read we not only stand, we sing and move and engage in all kinds of gestures because our praise of God is done not with our lips alone but with our bodies and with rich signs and symbols as a way of saying this is important stuff. This is a critical word. Nothing less than the word of life. Have you ever been in the presence of a visiting dignitary or a celebrity? The crowd will stand to greet them and a lot of times, music plays at the same time. So with the Gospel. We welcome the Gospel with lavish praise for the word Gospel means good news.

We stand to hear good news and furthermore we will welcome that good news before it is read with the words, "Glory to you, O Lord" and after it is read with similar words of praise: "Praise to you, O Christ." Some folks will even greet the Gospel by making the sign of the cross on their foreheads and then their lips and finally, their heart as a way of saying: may this God be in my head and on my lips and in my heart.

And who is this God? This God is very specific. Very particular. This God is none other than Jesus Christ. And what do we hear from week to week? We hear reports of the signs and wonders done by Jesus ... Jesus telling a story or Jesus proclaiming wisdom or Jesus healing the broken or Jesus feeding the hungry or Jesus demonstrating the love of God through radical service. We may hear Jesus forgiving sins or exorcising demons or crying from the Cross or accounts of his risen from the dead. We stand for this reading because it is all about Jesus.

And how do we hear this word? We are invited to stand but do we always greet this good news with enthusiasm? Does the Gospel sometimes flummox us? Perhaps even confound us? At times the Gospel might even offend us.

Let's consider today's Gospel, popularly known as the parable of the workers in the vineyard. I like to call it the parable of the generosity of God. A God whose generosity far exceeds anything else we know. When we come to church to hear God's word and especially the Gospel word are we prepared to hear something new and different and strange? You see, I really truly believe that God's ways are so much not our ways that this Word inevitably cajoles us, surprises us, and turns our worlds upside down.

So today's parable about those who work all day receiving the same wage as those who only work half the day or may even an hour gets us scratching our heads at the very least or, at the other end, might find us fuming. It seems that the landowner isn't very fair. It doesn't calculate. Yet, here is a Gospel word that we may not fully understand or have difficulty with but one that points to the amazing character of God who loves indiscriminately and is generous beyond comprehension. How nice it would be to fit God into our normal patterns of behavior. Routinely, though, what we get to hear and need to hear is that God is far beyond our

mechanisms of control and even our comprehension but it is a word we return to again and again because as the famous preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, in reference to this parable, it is like taking cod liver oil. You know it's true and good for you, it's just hard to swallow.

Yes, even those called to announce this Word find it hard to swallow. You heard Jonah in the first lesson bristle at God's decision to be gracious toward Nineveh. Jonah had hoped that God would kick them to pieces and in fact that's what Jonah wanted and he explains to God, "This is why I wanted to fun from you ... I knew you were gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding steadfast love and ready to relent form punishing and I would just as soon die rather than see you deal graciously." So what does Jonah do? He doesn't not stand for the Word. He will not stand for it. He goes far away from the city to sit and sulk beneath a bush.

Yes, sometimes we are offended because God chooses to be merciful to all. Sometimes we just don't get it. Nonetheless, we must pay attention to this word, this Gospel and stand for it and return to this Word, for though it unsettles it is what we know to be true and it is the word we need to hear.

You've heard me say, more than once, to "never resist a generous impulse." It is highly likely you will hear me say that quite a bit over the next several weeks because Generosity Sunday is coming up – the time when we make our commitment to giving. I've been asked how we can be so generous. Is it something we decide to do from our own will? How do we learn generosity? I truly believe that generous impulse comes from God and is a reflection of who God is and how God operates. That's the picture of God we get in today's gospel reading and I think the only way that happens for us is to allow this very Word to shape us and mold us and form us.

You see, I 'm not sure any of us will ever understand God's word. In so many ways it exceeds our reason. However, though we may not always understand it, we are called to stand under it. We are called to stand under this Word and that's not a bad reason to stand each Sunday to receive it.

Finally, this word is not mere teaching or moral advice. This Word, this Gospel, this good news is Jesus Christ himself. For when we stand to welcome and greet the Gospel we are standing to honor Jesus – Glory to YOU, O Lord ... Praise to YOU, O Christ.

In a wonderful little book called "What to look for in the Gospels," Martin Luther says that when you read the Gospel accounts of ...that that is Jesus coming to YOU. Living Word of God – present in this meal, in this assembly and in this Word.

The question isn't so much what do you stand for but WHO do you stand for. We stand to greet and listen to Jesus and that alone is good reason to stand. No, we may not always understand Jesus and at times his word may confound us, but it is also the very power that transforms us. Amen.