

“What Are You Standing For?”

a sermon by

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Text: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Several years ago I was shopping at the grocery store. As I stood in line waiting to pay for my purchases, I noticed a woman watching me closely. She seemed to recognize me, though I did not recognize her. Finally, she blurted it out, “I know you.” she said, “You’re the weatherman on Channel Nine.”

This morning we are considering one of the most significant aspects of the human enterprise, namely the remarkable capacity that each one of us has to represent something greater than ourselves. Each of us has the power to stand for something, and the way we use this determines, perhaps more than anything else, who we are as a person.

I.

In the first chapter of the Book of Acts we read of that pivotal movement in the Christian church between the death of Jesus and the beginnings of the church. After the resurrection, we learn that for forty days Jesus met with and taught his disciples. He told them he would have to depart from them but that he would give them the gift of his spirit. Then we read that Jesus turned and said to his disciples, "You shall be my witnesses." That is to say, you shall represent me. "When people see you," said Jesus, "they will think of me and what they see in you is what they will think of me."

Oftentimes people do not think they have much influence on others. The truth is that we have more influence than we often imagine. Take, if you will, the arena of the family. Child psychologists and family therapists often talk about what they call "family systems." By that they mean that each member of the family influences other members, so that if one member is acting in some inappropriate way, it often points out that the whole family is in distress.

I think it is true in other ways as well. My mother often identified members of our family with an adjective--one of her grandchildren was "indomitable;" for a grandson it was "wondering.." It was as if she was trying to help that individual understand a certain strength she saw in that person.

The English writer Charles Dickens had that capacity. Often literary critics laughed at his exaggerated way of depicting certain characters, but in fact, he was a genius at it. Many of his characters are so one-sided that they are symbols for some mannerism or personal quality. A "tightwad" we call a "Scrooge." Someone who is always waiting for something to turn up is "Micawber," "Uriah Heap" stands for mock humility. To be sure, Dickens was capable of exaggeration. In truth, people are often identified by what they stand for. Think of Mother Theresa and you think of a woman who poured out her life for the poor of Calcutta. Think of Donald Trump or Dennis Rodman, for example, and a very different image comes to mind.

III.

So, I want to be clear about what I am saying this morning. Each of us has the power to stand for something. The question is, "What are we standing for?" Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* has a section in which he deal with the mission of the church. For Barth there are fourteen tasks that define what the church is to do: preaching, teaching, worship, pastoral care, prayer, outreach to the poor, and so on. There was one, however, that I had never considered. Barth called it "the production of and existence of definite personal examples of Christian life and action." Christian saints--if you will. He was talking about individuals who stood for something that was so important that when people thought of these individuals, they immediately began to think of some activity or cause with which that person was identified.

This past summer marked the 35th anniversary of the famous New York rock festival "Woodstock." In its first twenty-four hours Woodstock attracted 300,000 young people. By and

large it was known as an event characterized by loud music, drug and alcohol usage, and promiscuous behavior.

It is worth noting that most of the people who attend the Woodstock reunions are not the individuals who were there thirty five years ago. The young people who attended the first Woodstock are now grown up. As adults, many view it as childish, irresponsible, irrelevant, or worse.

Contrast to the reunion that took place this year at the beaches of Normandy. For almost sixty years the soldiers who fought at D- Day and who survived have returned for reunions with other soldiers. The first twenty-four hours of the Normandy invasion involved 170,000 soldiers. In one ten-minute period on Omaha Beach, a single rifle company of 205 soldiers lost 197 of its men, including every officer and sergeant. The celebration at Normandy is very different than the celebration at Woodstock. The people who participated in D-day stood for something very different than those who participated in Woodstock.

III.

There is, however, something disturbing about our capacity to stand for something. Our influence is never neutral; it is good or bad, constructive or destructive, creative or stifling. Some years ago when the comedian Flip Wilson was asked his religious affiliation, he replied by saying that he was “a Jehovah’s bystander.” He went on to say that he used to be a “Jehovah’s witness,” but that he didn’t want to get involved.

We don’t like to face this. We prefer to stay on the sidelines, to be neutral about many things. Yet, if we are honest, there are some things about which you cannot be neutral. You cannot be neutral about the plight of the poor or homeless in this country. You cannot be neutral about racial prejudice. The simple fact is, if we do not represent honesty, trustworthiness, justice, fidelity, compassion, and tolerance, then we make the invasion of deceit, greed, violence, and intolerance easier.

Some years ago I visited Sterling Castle in Scotland. Nearby is the famous memorial that honors William Wallace, one of Scotland’s most famous heroes, who more than any other person, helped free the Scots from the tyrannical rule of King Edward I of England. The story of William Wallace was powerfully portrayed by Mel Gibson in the movie “Braveheart.” If you saw the movie, you may remember the scene in which William Wallace goes to visit Robert the Bruce, one of the most powerful men in Scotland. Wallace begs Robert to join him in his quest for Scottish freedom. Wallace knows that if Robert will join him they can be successful. But Robert betrays Wallace and Wallace is captured and taken to London where he is tortured and killed.

There are times when we are called to stand for something, and if we do not stand for the best, we almost inevitably stand for the worst.

There is another sobering thought about our influence and it is this: for the most part it is irrevocable. When Jesus called Zaccheus out of the sycamore tree, it was the beginning of a new

life for him. In fact, Zaccheus offered to restore fourfold those whom he had wronged. There is no reason to think that he was not sincere. But no matter how hard he tried; he could not undo all the damage that had been done.

When I was a student at Davidson College, there was a young man from Arkansas in the class behind me, whose name was Vince Foster. He later became a very distinguished lawyer and high-ranking member of the Clinton Administration. He died tragically, when he took his own life. At his funeral the President observed that we should remember Vince Foster in terms of how he lived and not how he died, but that is not always easy to do.

IV.

All of this leads me to a final point and it is that the real worth of a person is not in that person alone, but in what that person stands for. I think, for example, of President Abraham Lincoln. In many ways he was a very unlikely choice to be President. He was not physically attractive. He came from lowly origins and small opportunities, which no superficial graces could fully overcome. But as the years went on, both before and after his death, Lincoln began to take on an aura that has only grown with time. Historians have not noted a change in Lincoln that was evident in the “Gettysburg Address” and in his “Second Inaugural Speech” that shaped his personality in ways that had not been present before. When people think of Lincoln, they are reminded of magnanimity, patience, steadfastness, devotion to the nations’ unity, love of liberty, deepening faith and spiritual life. He came to stand for the things that a nation must have if it is to survive.

At the entrance porch of the Mackay Campus Center at Princeton Seminary there are a number of plaques on the wall, honoring some of the outstanding graduates of that seminary. One of the plaques reads:

OF THESE THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY

Walter Macon Lowrie class of 1840
Thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea in 1847

John Edgar Freeman class of 1838
Robert McMullin class of 1853
Who with their wives were shot by order of Nana Sahib in 1857 at Cawnpore, India

Levi Janvier class of 1840
Stabbed by a Sikh fanatic at Lodiana, India 1864

Isidor Loewenthal class of 1854
Shot accidentally or by design at Peshawur, India

John Rogers Peale class of 1905

Killed with his wife by a mob at Lien Chou, China 1905

We live in a time of celebrity religion in which many people are focused on the lives of those individuals who are most visible through television and other media. As I read the names of those individuals, I was aware that none of them were celebrities. They would not have appeared on Oprah or on late night television. But all of them stood for something greater than themselves.

As I look about me today, I see a society that in many ways has lost its bearings: the violence in the center cities, the broken homes, the children neglected and abused, the runaway and rampant consumerism and greed. Is there anything more important today than people who are willing to stand for something else--decency, respect for others, concern for the less fortunate?

Jesus once said, "You shall be my witnesses," as if to say in plain English, "If you will, you shall represent me, not because you are worthy to do so, but because you have been chosen, called out, and sent out for that reason. You shall stand for me in the home, in the office, in school, and people will judge me by you."

Someone once said that we are all like flagpoles--some are tall and prominent; some are small. But the glory of a flagpole is not its size, but the colors it flies. When a person comes to the end of life, perhaps the most satisfying thing of all is the ability to say, "I am sorry I was not a better flagpole, but I am not ashamed of the colors I flew."

Amen