

“What Are You Standing For?”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

January 14, 2007

Text: “....and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

This past week our nation said farewell to Gerald Ford, the thirty-eighth President of the United States. Gerald Ford was an anomaly in American History. He was the only person in our history who served as both Vice President and President and who was never elected to either of these offices.

As I watched part of the funeral services at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., I was moved not only by the beauty of that sanctuary, the majestic hymns that were played and sung, but even more so by the tributes paid to this former President. Gerald Ford did not have the great presence of a Ronald Reagan, nor the keen wit and presence of John Kennedy. He was not imperial or in any way arrogant. He was, to use his own language, “a Ford, not a Lincoln.” Although he was probably the greatest athlete to occupy the White House, there were times he was very awkward, particularly on the golf course. Bob Hope once said that he played golf with Gerald Ford and that during the round the President had a birdie, an eagle, a squirrel, a deer, and a cow. He did have something, however, that was remembered by all who knew him. He was an honest, straightforward, unpretentious man who presided over this country in one of its darkest moments and led our country through that dark period with honesty, dignity, and great character.

I.

In the first chapter of the Book of Acts we read Luke’s remarkable account of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. In Luke’s chronology there was a forty-day period between the resurrection of Jesus and the time of his return to the heavens. During that forty-day period Jesus

was seen by believers and nonbelievers. He spoke with his disciples and prepared them for the time of his departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

During this time Luke tells us that Jesus said to his disciples, “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

There are two important things about this verse. The first is that it forms a geographical outline of the book. The Book of Acts tells the story of how the gospel was proclaimed first to the Jews in Jerusalem, but then to the gentiles in Antioch, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, and Rome. The second important thing is that Jesus speaks to a remarkable characteristic that each one of us possesses—the power to represent things greater than ourselves. When Jesus says to them, “You shall be my witnesses,” he is making a direct and definite appeal to their power of representation. That is to say, “You can be more than yourselves; you have the power to stand for honesty, integrity, and truth.” You shall be my witnesses.

II.

The truth then is that all of us possess the power to represent things greater than ourselves. One of the interesting traits of my mother is her capacity to identify characteristics of her children and grandchildren. She has a remarkable capacity to sum up the character of a person in one word. Mention a grandchild to her and she will reply: indomitable, curious, and adventurous. But she understood something else. Words not only describe, they inspire, and in a subtle way she was trying to tell her children not only who they were, but also what they could be.

The great English novelist Charles Dickens was often ridiculed about the exaggerated way he depicted his characters. In fact, however, Dickens’ ability to describe his characters was so powerful that it introduced a new vocabulary into the English language. Micawber stands for waiting for something to turn up, Scrooge for miserliness, Uriah Heap for mock humility. To be sure, Dickens was very capable of over exaggeration, but he was also able to describe the essence of a personality in an indelible way.

What, then, are you standing for? What do you remind people of when they think of you?

This is a challenge that none of us can evade. You say, “But I am only a small cog in a great wheel.” That may be true, but you can stand for something great. The smallest of us can stand for the greatest things. A lantern can represent the same cause of light that the sun stands for, and in its own corner of the world, it can do what the sun cannot do.

III.

So what are you standing for in terms of your moral loyalties? There are two kinds of greatness. There are those individuals who achieve great things. They lead people in battle. They build great enterprises. They achieve a reputation for success. Napoleon Bonaparte was a great general. John D. Rockefeller was a great businessman. Albert Einstein was a great scientist.

But there is another kind of greatness. There is a moral greatness that belongs to those individuals, who by their devotion to higher things, change the landscape of entire civilizations. Abraham Lincoln had that kind of greatness. Nelson Mandela had that kind of greatness.

Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who more than any other person became the spokesperson for a people who had long been denied the rights and freedoms that are inalienable to this nation. A number of years before his assassination in 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. had a brush with death. One day in the late 1950's he was in New York City in a bookstore where he was autographing copies of one of his books. While he was sitting there a demented woman came up to him, and said, "Are you Martin Luther King, Jr.?" Without looking up, King replied, "Yes."

Suddenly Dr. King felt a sharp pain in his chest. The woman had stabbed him with a knife. He was quickly rushed to the hospital in Harlem. When the doctors placed him on the operating table, they saw that the blade of the knife had gone through his chest, and that the tip of the blade was on the edge of his aorta artery. The next day the New York Times quoted one of the doctors who had attended Dr. King that afternoon who said that if Martin Luther King, Jr. had sneezed, he would have died. He was that close to death.

King went on to say that while he was in the hospital, he received a number of letters and telegrams. One of them was from the President of the United States; another from the Vice President. He received a visit from the Governor of New York State.

The letter he said meant the most to him, however, was one he received from a young teenager who lived in White Plains, New York. She wrote simply: "Dr. King, I am a ninth grade student at the White Plains High School. While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I am a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm writing you to say that I'm so happy you didn't sneeze."

I am glad that Dr. King did not sneeze as well, because someone had to be the messenger to send a wake-up call to a nation that was languishing under the terrible oppression of racism and segregation.

IV.

There is a second question that I want to ask each one of you, and that is what are you standing for in your religious life? Jesus said to his disciples, "You shall be my witnesses." In other words, people will judge me by what they see in you.

Most of us are not comfortable being witnesses. We don't like wearing our religion on our shirtsleeves. We are like the comedian Flip Wilson who was once asked his religious preference. He said he was a "Jehovah's Bystander." He said he used to be a "Jehovah's Witness," but he didn't want to get involved.

You see, most of us don't want to get involved, but we are. Every one of us here in this sanctuary today is involved. People will judge our religion by us, whether we like it or not. They will know that we are members of First Presbyterian Church and whether we like it or not, they will judge our church and its witness by us. They will judge us by what we do in the workplace, in the home, in our schools.

That is particularly true today for those individuals who have been elected to serve as officers of our church. As Elders and Deacons, whether you like it or not, people know that you represent our church and they will judge us by you.

One of the most remarkable books that I have read in recent years is Peter Ackroyd's *The Life of Sir Thomas More*. He is the only person in the history of England who was chosen by the king as a Knight of the Roundtable and later conferred the title by the Church of England of both a saint and a martyr. Some years ago Robert Bolt wrote a play about Thomas More that he entitled *A Man For All Seasons*.

Thomas More was a close friend and confidant of the King of England, Henry VIII. He was one of the most respected men in England. He was clearly a man who loved life and lived it to the fullest. He was a scholar, a lawyer, and was surrounded by a loving and supportive family. A visitor's book in his house would look like a sixteenth century *Who's Who*: Holbein, Erasmus, Collet—everybody.

But something happened in the life of Thomas More. When King Henry VIII decided to divorce his wife Catherine to marry Anne Boelyn, he required every citizen to pledge an oath supporting the divorce and remarriage. But Thomas More would not take the oath. There was something within him that would not allow him to do so—a conscience he called it—no larger than a tennis court. The King begged him to take the oath. His wife and daughter urged him to take the oath.

But Thomas More refused to do so. He was eventually convicted of treason, placed in prison, and finally beheaded at the tower of London. As he faced his executioner, his final words were, "I die the King's good servant, but God's servant first."

What are you standing for? Someone once said that we are like flagstaffs. Some flagstaffs are very tall and prominent and some are small, but the glory of a flagstaff is not its size but the colors that it flies. When a person comes to the end of his or her life, I should suppose that the most satisfying thing that any of us could say is that perhaps we could have been a better, taller, or straighter flagstaff, but that we were not ashamed of the colors that we flew.

What are you standing for?

Amen!