

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
Proper 16B
August 23, 2009

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I wonder why you chose to be an Episcopalian. Was it because you didn't like handling snakes? Was it because we demonstrate pew rituals? Did you choose our denomination for the free wine? Maybe, as Robin Williams adds to his top ten list, you like being an Episcopalian because you don't have to know how to swim to get baptized.¹ Or on a more serious note, maybe you found the Episcopal Church to be holding out a welcoming embrace when you were hurt in a relationship or offended by another church. Perhaps someone chose the Episcopal Church for you like my parents did. Early on they said as for us and for our household, we will serve the Lord.

One of the reasons I love the Episcopal Church is the fact that we are encouraged to think for ourselves. God gave us rational thought, experience, and logic to interpret scripture, and we believe it is okay! And sometimes after rational thought and reflection and prayer, we choose to follow Jesus, and sometimes we offend people. Sometimes, when we have chosen to stand up for what we believe in, we have ticked people off. We believe that our God has given us reason to work through difficult issues and to discern what the word of God means for us today in our contemporary society. We believe that we can live together in this tension and continue to work through difficult times, offended or delighted. I like that about the Episcopal Church.

This morning our gospel lesson from John focuses our attention on the subject of decision-making in the face of the divine revelation. When the truth of God is set right before us, what do we decide to do? Do we choose to stand up for what we believe in and serve the Lord, or do we slowly blend into the crowd and shy away from the potential consequences?

You know, Jesus offended a few folks. And many times, those people just took their money and ran. Jesus offended a few in the story this morning. He had just told the disciples that they were to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life. The cannibalistic thought was almost too much to fathom. How could they accept that teaching? And how are they to accept that this plain old guy from Nazareth, just a lowly carpenter's son, could actually be the son of God? His words were beyond offensive. This was blasphemy!

But Jesus said, 'You've got to make a choice. Make a decision and stick to it. Choose this day whom you will serve.'

Making that choice to stand up for Jesus may upset some of your closest friends and family members. Your decisions may bring out the worst in the world around you, so Paul gives us some advice to survive those challenges.

Take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Proclaim the gospel of peace.

Often times, it seems we get wrapped up in how we think things ought to be in the world, in our families and even in the church. We want things our way. We start to even worship our own way, instead of worshiping the one we are gathered here to worship. We worry more about watching what other people are doing and whether it is 'right' than we do about watching what comes out of our own mouth or what we do with our own lives. We shy away from action because we are afraid of offending someone we may love.

And I hear Jesus say, get over yourselves. Just stand up for peace and love everyone at that foundational level. You don't have to agree on everything. You don't even have to like each other. But you do have to move on. You have to stand up and stand for me, and get over yourselves. There are more important things to deal with.

I look forward to finding out one day in eternal life what Jesus really does care about. I don't think Jesus cares that I'm an Episcopalian. I don't think Jesus cares that we have hundreds of different denominations and churches and organizations that all claim in their own way to worship him. I don't think Jesus cares about what day we worship or what color hangings there are or whether we have an organ or rock band.

But I do think Jesus cares that we do what he has called us to do. Jesus said, stand up and go. Go and serve him by serving others. He didn't say serve yourself.

In a few minutes we're going to sing one of my favorite hymns, 'Stand up, Stand up for Jesus.' I don't know why it's one of my favorites but I love the tune, and I think my grandmother used to sing it. I know we sang it in her Baptist Church. I know some people will not like the battle imagery, but this is not about physical violence, so we must let that go. I knew I wanted to use it in this sermon, but I didn't know why. So I went to the computer and typed it in google, and up came the story of how the hymn was written.

It turns out there is an Episcopal connection!

In the year 1858, a great city-wide revival swept across the city of Philadelphia. It was called The Work of God in Philadelphia. Of the participating ministers none was more powerful than the twenty-nine year old Episcopalian, Dudley Tyng. He was known as a bold, fearless and uncompromising preacher with great influence on the other spiritual leaders around him. His father, The Rev. Stephen H. Tyng, was for many years the pastor of the large Episcopalian Church of the Epiphany in Philadelphia. After serving a short time as his father's assistant, Dudley succeeded his father in this pulpit. However, some of the more fashionable members soon became upset with their young preacher because of his straight-forward doctrinal preaching and his strong stand against slavery. He resigned this pulpit and with a group of faithful followers organized The Church of the Covenant.

In addition to his duties as pastor of the new and growing congregation, Tyng began holding noon-day services at the downtown YMCA. Great crowds were attracted to hear this dynamic young preacher. On Tuesday, March 30, 1858, over 5,000 men gathered for a noon mass meeting to hear young Tyng preach from Exodus 10:11 - "Go now ye that are men and serve the Lord." Over 1,000 of these men responded by committing their hearts and lives to Christ and His service; the sermon was often termed one of the most successful of the times. During the sermon the young preacher remarked, "I must tell my Master's errand, and I would rather that this right arm were amputated at the trunk than that I should come short of my duty to you in delivering God's message." The next week, while visiting in the country and watching the operation of a corn thrasher in a barn, he accidentally caught his loose sleeve between the cogs; his arm was severed. Four days later infection developed., and Dudley Tyng died on April 19, 1858. At his death bed, when asked by a group of sorrowful friends and ministers for a final statement, he whispered, "Let us all stand up for Jesus."

The next Sunday Tyng's close friend and fellow worker, the Rev. George Duffield, pastor of the Temple Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, preached his morning sermon as a tribute to his departed friend, choosing as his text Ephesians 6:14: "Stand, therefore, having your loins girt about with truth,

and having on the breastplate of righteousness." He closed his sermon by reading a poem of six stanzas that he had written, inspired, as he told his people, by the dying words of his esteemed friend. Rev. Duffield's Sunday School superintendent was so impressed by the verses that he had them printed for distribution throughout the Sunday School. The editor of a Baptist periodical happened to receive one of these pamphlets and promptly gave it a wider circulation. From there it eventually found its way into the hymnals and hearts of God's people across the world. ⁱⁱ

One man made the difference in many peoples' lives. He stood up to denounce slavery. He had to leave his job. But he kept on standing up for what he knew was right. He kept on preaching peace and reconciliation. He preached the love of all people, no matter your color or background.

That changes people's lives. Sharing God's love does change people, and they become disciples.

That is our call today. To serve God by loving others and telling them that God loves them no matter what. God challenges us to a different kind of life where the answers aren't clear cut, nor are they easy. There is no specific roadmap to peace in the Gospels.

But Jesus is our roadmap to peace, and watching what comes forth from our very mouths and bodies. It is not easy to stand up for Jesus alone, but that is why we come here, so that we can help each other stand up for Jesus with our love for one another, being nourished to stand by his very body and blood.

We chose to serve the Lord. Serving the Lord is about the Christ in me respecting the Christ in you. We yield to each other, no matter who we are, because we are inseparable from each other, just as Jesus is inseparable from the Church. Serving the Lord is about loving each other as much as God loved us. And my friends, that's a lot of lovin'.

That's why I chose to be an Episcopalian. That's why I chose to be a Christian. That's why I chose to be a servant. Because I can love and be loved in this Christian community even when you offend me and when I offend you.

It's mysterious though isn't it? Because sometimes it would be much easier, much less controversial and much less offensive to just go away. But where in the world would we go? For it is here, in this life in community, around this table, in this space that we have heard the words of eternal life. It is in each of your faces that I see the awesome grace of Jesus Christ who promises us that we will live forever. This is where we have come to see and hear and know that God is love. And for that gift, "what offense can we not bear?"ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Robin Williams *Top Ten Reasons to Be an Episcopalian* from an HBO special.

ⁱⁱ Quoted from "101 Hymn Stories" by Kenneth Osbeck. Kregel Publishers, P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501, 1982. Used by permission - duplication without permission is a violation of U.S. copyright law.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* p. 179. Cowley: 1999.