

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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Standing With Jesus

Ephesians 6:14

It is good to be back after a three week vacation that included two weeks in England. We had a very enjoyable time but we would have enjoyed our travels more if we had not had access to newspapers or the BBC. The first week we were bombarded by news of a new war in the Middle East. The second week it was the revelation of a plot to blow up airlines flying from Great Britain to the United States. We flew from Heathrow on United Airlines the day after another United flight from that airport made an emergency landing in Boston when a passenger had to be restrained. I am grateful that our travel arrangements were not significantly disrupted. But the events swirling around us gave us a vivid sense of the instability of the world in which we live. This was, I believe, an appropriate time to be exploring family and spiritual roots. In times of crisis we all need a place to stand. We all need to remember who we are and what we stand for.

In the sixth chapter of Ephesians Paul invites the members of the Ephesian church to be clear about their role in the world. Throughout the letter Paul uses the metaphor of walking to describe the church's commitment to mission. The community of faith is walking with its Lord as it preaches and teaches and responds compassionately to human need. But in the sixth chapter of Paul's letter there is a shift in the dominant metaphor. No longer does he speak of walking with the Lord. Now he calls the community to find a place to stand. "Stand, therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist (Ephesians 6:14)."

This challenge to find a place to stand comes out of Paul's understanding of the arena of global conflict in which the early church lived. Paul encourages the church not to be too quick to take sides in the conflicts that swirl around them. The issues are rarely as simple as the combatants claim. To live in the truth means to pay attention to the subtleties and ambiguities that are ignored by warring factions. It means recognizing that there is always truth on both sides. Paul calls the church to be less concerned about taking sides and more concerned about standing in the truth of the gospel.

Jesus makes the same point in the sixth chapter of John's gospel. There Jesus is addressing the disciples on whether they will stand with him or walk away. Some of his disciples are questioning his teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. They say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it (John 6:60)?" The teaching which is particularly troublesome to these disciples seems to be Jesus' challenge to their conventional understanding of what a messiah is. They want Jesus to be the kind of messiah they have been taught to anticipate. They are looking for a messiah who will break the military power the Romans hold over them. They believe that the solution to their problems will come by military means. They want a messiah who will destroy their enemies.

Jesus is not the messiah they are seeking. He is a messiah who proclaims that the most enduring force in the world is the grace of God. He challenges them to look beyond power politics and military solutions to live in dependence on God's grace. John tells us that Jesus' refusal to take sides in the Jewish insurgency against the Romans led many of his disciples to leave him. Jesus then turns to the

twelve and says, “Do you also wish to go away (John 6:67)?” Do you wish to go with them to search for a military savior? Or will you stand with me in the truth of the gospel trusting the mercy of God? Simon Peter speaks for the twelve when he says, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:68)?” In the midst of the crisis which swirled around them, the twelve chose to stand with Jesus.

Standing with Jesus is what we are about on this Registration Sunday. The beginning of a new program year in the life of Westminster is a time to renew our commitment to the ministry God has given to us. What we do to serve God in this place is an expression of the identity which sustains us in the storms of our time.

During our visit to England we worshiped at the French Protestant Church in Canterbury. This congregation has been worshipping in the Canterbury Cathedral since 1576. For the past 111 years they have met in the Cathedral’s chapel of the Black Prince. It is one of only three French refugee churches in England that still worship in French. But the conversation after the services was mostly in English. The pastor was a young black man who was a refugee from the Congo. He preached a very fine sermon and I was pleased to discover that I could follow almost half of it. That was better than I expected. I was feeling really good about that until I visited with him after the service. Speaking in perfect English he said, “I realize that many of my listeners are not very fluent in French. So I have learned to make my sermons extremely simple.” I had understood him because I had been hearing an extended children’s sermon.

I was particularly interested in a painting that hung in the front of the chapel. It depicted 16th century French refugees landing at Dover harbor. The refugees are shown streaming up the hills past the white cliffs and Dover Castle, moving in the direction of Canterbury. There are men and women, young and old, children, babes in arms, horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, and cats. This was their exodus from genocide. They had crossed the channel and arrived at a place where they could stand in the faith that God had given them. There was no military savior to subdue their enemies. They had come to this strange place knowing that they must depend on the grace of God. This was the historical moment of crisis which gave this congregation its unique sense of identity. Every Sunday worshipers look at that painting of an event that took place 400 years ago and they remember who they are. They are part of a community which came to this place so that they could stand with Jesus.

In 1977 I was serving in my first pastorate in Kingfisher, Oklahoma. I can still remember vividly the day that I drove to the farm of a family that had just received devastating news. The patriarch of the family was a very successful wheat farmer named Otto. Otto farmed with his thirty-eight year old son. The son had just been diagnosed with ALS. After visiting with the son and his wife I drove to Otto’s place. The first thing Otto said to me was, “In this family we trust the Lord.” Three years later when we held a memorial service for his son, Otto was still trusting in the Lord. I will never forget seeing him on the front row belting out the hymn as tears poured down his face. In the midst of this horrendous crisis Otto knew who he was. He knew that he had a place to stand. We can stand there, too.