

On the last Sunday of December, we launched into a multi-week series focusing on the Gospel of John. As I've said a few times, the Gospel of John is quite different than Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the 3 gospels that come before John in the NT.

So far, we've seen that John includes stories that are not in the other 3 gospels, for example, the changing of water into wine at Cana of Galilee and the Raising of Lazarus. These miracles are only in John. We've also seen that Jesus says things in John which aren't quoted in the other gospels. For example, there are 7 "I Am" statements in John that are not in the other gospels: "I am the Good Shepherd", "I am the True Vine", "I am the way, the truth and the life." We've also seen that while the other 3 gospels say that Jesus went up to Jerusalem once as an adult, John says that Jesus went into Jerusalem on 3 occasions. In fact, 92 percent of John is not found in the other Gospels, and then, in 21:25, John writes that there are many other stories about Jesus that he did not include in his Gospel – perhaps because these stories are already in the other gospels; but we can't know for sure.

But today, and over the next few Sundays, we'll be exploring testimony that is included in all 4 gospels: the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And this is critical, I think, for us to know – that this is the central story which all 4 of the gospels want to share: that Jesus went to the cross for the sake of our salvation.

So, before reading from John 18, I want to say: this is why I stress the importance of attending worship throughout Holy Week: on Palm Sunday, on Holy Thursday, on Good Friday, and Easter! This is truly the holiest season of the Christian year, and if all the gospels tell us that the events of this week are central to our salvation, then we need to make every effort to participate in all of the of Holy Week observances so that this story – of Jesus' journey to the cross – becomes etched upon our hearts, minds, and souls through annual repetition. The dates and times of our Holy Week services are listed in your bulletin. Put them on your calendar and plan now to attend.

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[Read John 18:1-18]

As I read through John 18 this week, I could not do so and, at the same time, ignore all of the acrimonious debates that vex the civility of

discourse on issues affecting our cities, our churches, our nation, and our world. I'm even hesitant to name any of these specific issues aloud, for fear that one of you will assume I'm taking a certain side... Ironically, in the midst of writing this sermon, I got a voice mail from a reporter asking me my views about the Church Directory sign in Spreckles Park. (I feel fortunate I was out of the office.)

I do know that every so often some of you want me to take a stand on this or that issue, so long as – of course – it's the exact stand you'd take... But as I look around this sanctuary, I see people who I know have very different views than each other and who, on some topics, hold views very different than mine. So, I think we have an even more foundational question to ask. We need to consider HOW Christians may take a stand, in a way that honors our Christ and glorifies God.

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In our reading from John 18, we see several people taking a stand. Judas takes the first stand. He breaks away from the group of disciples to betray Jesus. Coming with agents of both church and state (and I'm of the opinion that collusion between church and state is never a very good idea); but coming with agents of both church and state – Pharisees, temple police, and Roman soldiers – Judas stands in the garden with those who have come bearing lanterns, torches, and weapons to arrest the man Judas had been following up until this very night! And let me mention that the word translated as "detachment" in v. 3 is *speira*, a word that literally means "a body of 600 men." Such a large number suggests that these soldiers mean business and that they anticipate fierce resistance to their night time raid.

It would make sense then, that it'd be Jesus' turn to take his stand; to stand against the forces of evil and darkness by demonstrating his power over Judas and the army of temple and state police who've come to seize him. But Jesus' stand, though confident and composed, is also remarkably peaceable. Though Jesus does not want or desire that which is to come, he takes a surprisingly vulnerable stand, stepping out of the darkness to initiate his own arrest.

And then we have Peter. He takes a stand to protect and defend Jesus. Having committed himself to stand by Jesus come what may, Peter

draws his sword and cuts off the ear of Malchus, one of the men who's been dispatched to take Jesus into custody. But Jesus specifically rebuffs Peter's brash stand, telling him to sheath his sword.

And here we have what seems to be a clear lesson: that for followers of Jesus, 'taking a stand' – even a stand we perceive is to defend Jesus – well, we may not be doing it in the way Jesus asks of us. So again, how Christians take a stand seems a foundational question...

The stands taken in the text are clear. Judas stands in opposition to Jesus. He chooses betrayal and money over loyalty, friendship, and faith. The Roman soldiers and Temple police stand in fidelity to the religious and political leaders who have given them orders. They stand in fear and in duty. Peter stands in faithfulness, yet Jesus' admonishment demonstrates that his is not the faithfulness Jesus wants. And Jesus? His stand is vulnerable, yet calm, composed, and confident.

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So, it's confession time. For the majority of my life, I've had the same twitchy and reactionary response displayed by Peter. Over and over again I've taken what I deem to be the right stand on various issues, complete with an arsenal of scriptural validation to vanquish those who are, to my mind, clearly wrong. And more times than not, I think I've wounded people by failing to consider and weigh how I, as a Christian, take a stand that would not earn Jesus' rebuke.

Because of this, I want to offer three scriptures that have become guides for me as I consider how I take a stand...

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The first is Philippians 4:8. This has been one of my 2 life verses for the past 2 years. While there are various translations of this passage, here is how I've memorized it: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable... if there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise, focus your gaze on these things."

So much of what I see in the arguments over immigration, guns, even the Church Directory sign... it gets so ugly. Philippians 4:8 prods me to resist that ugliness and to concentrate my gaze on those things that are worthy of praise, like beauty, grace, kindness, and most of all, upon my Savior.

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The second scripture is 1 Corinthians 13:13, from the apostle Paul's so-called 'love chapter'. After eloquently describing the nature of love, Paul concludes with these words: "Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three—and the greatest of these is love." Say that with me. [] Which is these is the greatest?

At times, when I've taken a stand, neither my words nor deeds have indicated that the 'greatest of these is love.' Rather, I've behaved as if the greatest of these is faith – my faith! And because I'm taking a stand for my faith, for my convictions; love has often taken a back seat. So I've learned that if I'm angry, reactive, derisive, defensive and volatile, I'm not taking a stand in the way Jesus would affirm, because the greatest of these is love!

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The third verse is Ephesians 4:29. Last year, I did a 4-week sermon series on 'The Power of Words.' You can download print versions of those 4 sermons from our website if you start at April 30, 2017. (And I've begun to think I need to repeat that series annually!) Eph. 4:29 was the theme verse for the series: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." To honor and glorify our Christ, our words on whatever issue – spoken, posted on Facebook, written on a placard – our words should build up and give grace to those who hear.

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There are other passages that I could mention, but if we use these 3 as a guide for 'how' we take a stand, before we take a stand – no matter how big or small the issue – I believe that we will bring honor and glory to the One who, in that garden on the night of his arrest, took a stand for us based on one thing; his great love for us.

Amen.