

Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus!

A sermon based on Matthew 26:69-75.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I know there are some of you who are professional football fans, but even for those of you who aren't, do any of you recall what the biggest news of the NFL was last season? I think Kevin could probably speak most to it, because it started with his favorite team...or more particularly, one player in general, Colin Kaepernick, who for the entire year refused to stand for the national anthem.

His reasoning? **"I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder (in reference to what he determined to be unrestrained police racial profiling and brutality)."**

Fast forward to today, where he's a free agent, looking to sign with another team, and, wouldn't you know, his tune has changed a little, as it's been reported that he'll now stand for the national anthem, believing **"his protest methods drew enough attention to the social injustice he was trying to highlight, and he no longer wants the protest to detract from the positive change that he believes has been created."** Or, as many are assuming, he's now going to "take pride" in his country because he wants another team to sign him and he doesn't want that distraction to scare other teams off (which is actually what's happening).

Friends, how something as simple as standing up for the national anthem can equate to pride and love you have for your country. I think of the cymbals clashing in "God Bless the USA" right at the moment where you sing, "And I gladly stand up," because "there ain't no doubt [you and] I love this land." To me, the pinnacle of patriotism.

Standing up...a great way to show love and support. As we continue looking at the sacred wounds Jesus suffered in his Passion, today, it's the wound of denial. And as we look at Peter's great and grievous denials, we have to ask ourselves these 3 questions, "Do I know Jesus?" "Do I love Jesus?" "Am I willing to stand up for Jesus?"

Because Peter wasn't. Which was a little weird because Peter was typically the gutsy one of the disciples. He certainly seemed to be one of the more outspoken of the Twelve. Why, just a few hours earlier, he had emphatically asserted, **"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."** That's what he said to Jesus...what he promised. And then, a short time later, Peter had used his novice sword skills to chop off one of Jesus' captors' ears...he was ready to fight for Jesus. Peter loved his Lord. He could not imagine the intense love he felt for Jesus ever being insufficient.

Until he found his back against the wall, so close to Jesus' enemies, being questioned about his relationship with Jesus (maybe with the fire flickering in his face, he felt the heat of an interrogation), and with Satan working so hard to break down his fortitude.

And Satan won...three times...just like Jesus predicted. Three opportunities for Peter to faithfully confess his Savior...three opportunities to stand up for Jesus...three adamant denials, ***"I don't know the man!"***

Why do you think Peter caved? It's probably not too difficult to guess. It was a stressful and scary evening for Peter, and I'm guessing he had an idea of what was going on inside the Temple, how they were putting Jesus on trial with the intent to find him guilty of some crime and convict him to death. What would happen to anyone who ever associated with Jesus, then? What would happen to Peter? Already hours earlier, Jesus knew what would happen there. The Lord knows what is in man. And in fallen mankind there is fear—fear of death above everything else. So much for ***"Even if I have to die with you."***

That fear inside of Peter...that fear lives inside of you and me, too. Maybe not to that extent. Here, in our little corner of God's great creation, there's not the imminent danger that if you or I go outside and proclaim to some stranger our faith in Jesus as our Savior from sin, then death is a likelihood. It's not even a strong possibility.

Yet, who among us hasn't added to Jesus' wound of denial? For opportunities to confess our Savior are all around us, yet how often don't we pass them by in silence. And our silence denies him.

Ok, I know they say it's taboo to talk about sex, religion, and politics (three extremely personal or divisive topics), but I think you'd agree with me, with society the way it is today, that sentiment seems to be off the table.

I know you're not all super comfortable talking about your faith, or about Jesus, or about what the Bible says (probably one of the reasons you're not all pastors), but are those legitimate excuses for not talking at all or are they just that...excuses?

I know it can be embarrassing to put yourself out there, to be in the spotlight, to share what you believe, and, to at the same time, be possibly opening yourself up to intense criticism and hurtful putdowns and attacks.

I can remember being at a water park when I was younger, standing in line next to my dad, waiting to get on the ride, listening as he was the only one who spoke up as a couple of teenagers were skipping ahead in line, telling they could wait just like the rest of us. And I was embarrassed. I didn't like others looking at us. And that was a case of morality, something most people would agree on, that "you shouldn't be doing that." How much more potential for embarrassment, then, when it comes to standing up for Jesus and what he stood for: ***"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*** Would Jesus be embarrassed by our silence?

I know it's easy to be selfish...to think about me and how talking about Jesus, what that might result in for me. And then, to finally do what's best for me...which is usually the silence.

Doesn't all that show our fear is the same? The fear of the death of others' respect, the fear of the death of an important friendship (for who wants to be friends with a religious fanatic or, what they might see you more as, a religious freak), the fear of the death of our reputation (for what are others going to say about us if we're known for speaking up in confession of the Lord and wanting to talk about Jesus)? The silence is denial just as surely as saying, "I don't know the man."

Do you remember the three questions I posed earlier? “Do I know Jesus?” “Do I love Jesus?” “Am I willing to stand up for Jesus?” Do I know Jesus? Then why, with my silence, do I forget Jesus is greater than the ups and downs? That Jesus is greater than the embarrassment, the putdowns, the un-comfortability, potential for broken relationships with other? Do I love Jesus? Enough to be the witness he’s called me to be? Am I willing to stand up for Jesus? To show my pride, my love, my support for him? Or, am I embarrassed?

And Jesus says, ***“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns/denies me before men, I will disown/deny him before my Father in heaven.”***

Our denials of Jesus—they don’t result in his denial of us. See how Jesus goes into his Passion to be wounded for our sins! Where we denied, Jesus stood up...in the Garden of Gethsemane, and truthfully told his captors, ***“I am he.”*** Before the Sanhedrin, when they asked, ***“Are you the Christ, Son of God?”*** Jesus stood up and confessed, ***“Yes, it is as you say.”*** As Pilate questioned him, ***“Are you the king of the Jews?”*** Jesus stood up and confessed, ***“Yes, it is as you say...My kingdom is not of this world.”***

Jesus stood up in the face of death...so he could lay his life down for you and me. Jesus did not let fear of death deter Him, and we do well to ponder that now.

For though our Lord hates death—despises it, scorns it—He did not fear it. He came into this world to destroy it. He came among us to let death devour Him, so that by laying down his life as a sacrifice for us, by falling into death’s stinking gullet, the One over whom death had no claim would destroy death forever, and so His people would be set free from their slavery, set free from their fear.

You know, standing before his captors, the high priest, Pilate, Jesus Jesus knew what was about to happen. He knew he would yield his life upon the cross—a fragrant offering and sacrifice to his Father, his blood blotting out forever the guilt of our sin and the sin of the whole world. And Jesus also knew and rejoiced that his Father would never abandon him to the grave.

Jesus did not fear death, because death would never be the end of him or of anyone who is joined in living faith to him. Did you hear that? As Jesus didn’t fear death, we need not fear death either...because Jesus knows us (that we are his), because he loves us (with the greatest grace this world has ever known), and because he stood up for us (by laying down his life on the cross to save ours).

And, because of his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus will acknowledge us before his Father in heaven.

And, what now? Right, because Jesus’ loving stand for us, it doesn’t leave the door open for us to continue to remain silent and so deny Jesus. So, what now?

Do you remember how Peter’s story ended? After the third time and the rooster’s crow, he saw his Lord, remembered his words predicting Peter’s denial, and he went outside and wept bitter tears for his own fear and sin and cowardice. But he did not despair. That was a different confession, as he wept tears of repentance.

But that’s not where the story ended. Fast forward to after Jesus’ resurrection, there was another miraculous catch of fish, and as Jesus sat around the fire with the disciples, he asked Peter, “Do you love me?” Three times...for three denials. And three times, Peter got to change his tune and confess, ***“You***

know that I love you.” And Jesus’ response, *“Feed my sheep,”* was a reminder to Peter that he was Jesus’ servant, his witness, and he would get to spend the rest of his life standing up for Jesus.

And he did, to the very end, all the way, as years later Peter was told that he had to sacrifice to the emperor and deny this Jesus or die. In the grace of God he refused. He refused, and Peter followed in Jesus’ path. He, too, was crucified, though, according to Church tradition, upside down, because he did not feel himself worthy to die in the same manner as Christ. In the end, Peter looked the fear of death in the face and laughed at it. *“You cannot scare me this time! I know who lives forevermore, and I know you have no power over him. And I am in him, and His body and His blood are in me. My sins are forgiven, blotted out. My life is secure. You lose, Death, even as you take me. I am not afraid of you— not anymore.”*

You know, as our 2nd Lesson reminded us, the message we have, ***“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”*** Not just that our message of the gospel is unpopular...but did you catch that last part? It’s foolishness ***“to those who are perishing.”***

In Christ, there’s no fear of death for us. But there is a real, eternal death for those who aren’t hearing the message? They are perishing. Think about that urgency.

Do you know Jesus? By the grace of God, you do. Do you love Jesus? Then feed his sheep. Be his servant. Be his witness. Be willing to stand up for Jesus.

The wound of our denial...it pained Jesus just as much as his dear friend Peter’s denial did. But in his love, Jesus stood up for you and me and by those wounds healed us and forgave us.

Because Jesus loves me and stood up for me, I’m proud to be a child of Christ, and I gladly stand up and confess Jesus...because there’s no doubt I love my Savior. Stand up, stand up with me! Stand up, stand up for Jesus, you soldiers of the cross! Amen.