

Homily for May 13, 2001
5th Sunday of Easter Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 14:21-27
Revelation 21:1-5a
John 13:31-33a, 34-35

We are a people who stand for love.

Our gospel, John 13, brings us back to the Last Supper. Jesus is at the table with the Twelve – soon to be reduced to eleven when Judas leaves.

At the moment Judas left, Jesus started to speak about love and loving one another. Those words, “I love you,” are heard so often. What do they mean? What does it mean when a mother kisses her disabled child and says, “I love you”? What does it mean when a husband visits his sick wife in a hospital day after day and says, “I love you”? What did it mean when Jesus told his disciples (and us), “I love you”?

You all know what it meant. You all know the price of love here on earth. You all know what it means to give life in a world that is dying: it means pain, tears, crying and mourning. In our common language, we often reduce the meaning of that life-giving word *love* to a harmless, sweet, sometimes even sensual, feeling of goodness. We didn't do that without reason, yet in the Gospel, the word love is always cross-shaped.

When Jesus said, “I love you,” the cross was included. When Jesus says we are to love one another, as he loved us, that love, too, is cross-shaped.

Our posture of love in prayer – our public prayer – is primarily standing. We also sit and we also kneel. But the posture of standing is the posture of one who loves enough to stand by to serve.

A moment ago you sat down. That movement, that sitting, is part of the liturgy. So, in fact, is what I am doing now: standing to address you. In our culture, sitting isn't just the restful posture, it is also the receptive posture. And standing isn't just the posture of the person who has nowhere to sit, it is the active and engaged posture of one who is doing something – giving some expression of love, respect.

If we want to understand something about posture's language at the liturgy and why it matters, it helps to look at how we learn to use various postures in various groups for various occasions. For instance, what has our culture made of the act of standing up? You're at the ballpark and they begin the “Star Spangled Banner.” You're in a courtroom and the judge rises to leave the bench. You're sitting at a mortuary visiting with friends and the widow of the deceased comes into the room and over to your group. You're back at the ballpark, the home team is losing by a run at the bottom of the ninth, there is a runner on second and two outs. What posture do you assume?

We get to our feet: for the judge, for the national anthem, for the widow, for the – we hope – base hit to tie the game. It isn't just habit and it isn't just emotion, but habit and emotion have something to do with it. It is the meaning standing gives to the moment and the meaning the moment gives to standing.

For us, standing can't be pinned down to just one little meaning: respect, say, or attention. It takes in a variety of related attitudes. Attending Mass, we stand to enter into the liturgy. We stand at the first approach of the gospel proclamation. We stand to make our prayers of intercession. We're on our feet again when we are urged by the presider to lift up our hearts and give thanks to the Lord our God. And we stand to go out from the room in our liturgy. For us, these are the moments that call for a posture that is engaged, ready to act, a posture that manifests respect and shows great attention to the matter at hand. People growing up and growing old in this culture probably would feel a little uncomfortable sitting during the procession that begins our liturgy or kneeling during the proclamation of the Gospel.

How do we speak of standing in our language? We say that a person stands on their own two feet. We stand up to be counted. We stand to serve. We stand for something. We stand by each other. In an old Latin expression, ancient

Christians called themselves “Circumstantes.” This meant that they were the people who “stand around” or, better, the people who “stand in a circle.” That is how they saw themselves, a community of people standing around the altar, encircling the altar, ready to do the deeds of love for one another and thus touch the world as the Body of Christ. Today, that is this community. We are the people who “stand around” the altar, who stand to surround the altar. For nearly all of the Church’s history, there have been no chairs, no pews, no benches. This is how it continues throughout many of the world’s Christian churches. We stand as people ready to put into action the loving deeds Jesus commands.

Standing is about respect, about attention, about readiness, about willingness to love as Jesus loves – to the point of death. For us, it is the basic posture, the normal posture. Anything else is a temporary departure, a little sitting, a little kneeling, then we get back to our basic “stance.”

If we sit down during the liturgy, it is usually to allow us to listen more attentively or to reflect in silence without the distraction of bearing all our weight on our two feet. Sitting is good for those tasks, but it has major drawbacks in that we can let it become the posture of an audience; that is what we are not.

Likewise, the kneeling posture for us has associations with repentance and with penance, with an attitude that expresses adoration, and sometimes simply with the posture an individual wants to take in moments of private prayer. For most of the history of the Church, the people didn’t sit down – pews were only widely used after the Reformation. The kneeling was done by Catholics at the liturgy itself only at rare moments. Now we can say that sitting and kneeling are part of our Catholic community in this society due to liturgy, each at a certain limited place. But still it should feel to us as Catholics that when we come together to do the liturgy, we do it on our feet.

Do we think of standing as our basic posture here? That’s hard when so much of the furniture in this room is about sitting. It puts us in the mind to watch – passively. It can make us feel confined, walled in before and behind by heavy furniture, lined up in rows. But we really are those *circumstantes*, those who stand around the table. This is Christ’s banquet table in our midst, this altar, but our

banquet is a banquet of pilgrims. The food here is the bread and wine eaten by those on a journey. It is a glimpse of a banquet, a glimpse of what we are moving toward – but we are people on the move, on our feet, not yet at ease.

Posture here is not arbitrary. It isn’t just anything the leader wants to make it. It isn’t whatever you feel like at the moment. It is the posture we take, not as individuals but as the church. So here are not two hundred and fifty individuals standing up, here is the vigilant, watchful, active body of believers. Our standing tells us what sort of church we are. Thus it shows respect and it teaches us respect: respect for one another as God’s creatures and as members of the body of Christ, and respect that springs from the presence of Christ in the word proclaimed from scripture and in bread and wine. Likewise, our standing here is a rehearsal for how we mean to be when we leave here: engaged with the world and one another, alert for God’s kingdom, standing firm, standing in solidarity with brothers and sisters to love as Jesus loves – a cross-shaped love.

To sit down with this assembly is also a rehearsal. It isn’t like sitting in a theater or before the TV or on the porch after a day’s work. It isn’t sitting to relax or be entertained. This is sitting to hear the lector read the scriptures to the church. It is sitting to let silence wash over us as we pray and reflect. Little by little, this posture teaches us how to listen and what to listen for. Little by little, the sitting we do here makes us a contemplative people, a people who can keep prayer rolling around inside us even in the busiest times of our daily living.

And to kneel with this assembly during penitential or very intense times is also a rehearsing. We need to be people who know what it means to be on our knees in sadness and sorrow, in adoration, in nightly prayers for forgiveness and for peace. Our worship here, Sunday by Sunday, is not only in the words of prayers and songs, it is in the whole human person that we are here. How each one of us joins in the liturgy – kneeling, sitting and standing – that is what makes and shapes and hammers out this liturgy of word and makes us people who stand for love.

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