

WORDLESS “WORDS”: FIVE GOOD REASONS TO STAND **a sermon preached by Pastor Paul Bosch at Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo, on February 15, 2015, The Transfiguration of Our Lord**

You may have heard the story of a tourist visiting a foreign country where he doesn't know the local language. He's got a local guide with him who does, however. And the two of them stop in a city park where a sidewalk preacher is haranguing a small crowd, He's standing on a soap box, and he's frowning, and he's pounding his fist in his palm, and he's shaking his fist at them, wagging a finger, and he's shouting with loud abrasive shouts.

The tourist turns to his guide and asks, “What's the fellow preaching?”

The guide says, “Love.”

We laugh at that, because the message is so much at odds with the non-verbals in his message. Almost everything the preacher is saying is contradicted by his voice, his actions, his gestures, his facial expressions. His “non-verbals”, that is, are speaking louder than his words.

So much of our catholic worship -- small c catholic -- is non-verbal communication. Posture, position, gesture, facial expression, tone of voice, even clothing, vestments: each of these are Wordless “Words”.

There are three good reasons for doing anything in Christian worship: 1) the practical, functional reasons, 2) the symbolic reasons – what you'd call the pedagogical or phenomenological reasons, and 3) the historical reasons.

That word phenomenological is from Greek and it means, as you might guess, the “word” – the *logos* – that the phenomenon – what you see – is saying. Like the sidewalk preacher's gestures and facial expressions. I argued a minute ago that all that speaks. They're phenomenon that communicate. Non-verbally. Our worship is full of such stuff. Wordless words. It makes our worship tremendously rich and pregnant with meaning, wherever you look.

Take the matter of standing and not sitting for hymns, for prayers, for liturgical exchanges like “The Lord be with you”, “And also with you.” You could sit for these things. Lots of Christian churches sit for the whole time. I've said it before: You can pray standing on your head, and God wouldn't care. But there wouldn't be much of a discernible message there to the rest of us if you did.

OK. So let's ask of standing, rather than sitting: What does this mean? What word, what message is here for us? What are the three good reasons for standing for hymns and prayers, rather than sitting?

First the practical reason, the functional reason. You sing better, you speak better, you're more engaged when you stand. If you sit – slouching like a couch potato as you would at home in front of the TV – you're simply not as intentional in what you're doing as when you stand. We don't want a room full of worshippers who are giving only partial attention to their role in worship. We want worshippers who are fully engaged, fully attentive, fully intentional in the acting out of their calling.

The term liturgy – you probably know this -- is from the Greek and it means the public work of the people for the common good, the good of everyone. It was used in Greek days of, say, building a bridge, or paving a road, or serving in the military, or even paying your taxes. All that was your liturgy. It's the public work all the people do for the common good, for the common welfare.

Now that's worship too. You are the main actor – not me, not Andre, not James, but you. And we want you fully engaged in it.

You speak better, you sing better, when you stand. Any dancer, any musician, any choral director would despair of the “couch potato” prayer and praise I'm criticizing here. Interestingly, many Protestant churches are reclaiming this custom of standing for worship -- not sitting, slouching like a couch potato.

For the same reasons, many Protestant churches are reclaiming what we've always had as Lutherans, that is, walking forward to the Table at Communion, rather than sitting in the pew to have ushers deliver the bread and cup to you as you sit. Walking forward to the Table is your own personal gesture of commitment, of engagement, of deliberate discipleship. Much better.

I should say here a word about those who cannot stand: the handicapped, the arthritic, the aged, those who've had knee surgery or hip surgery, even a parent with wiggly children. Even someone able-bodied who's simply hung over on a Sunday morning. Sure, if you cannot stand, be my guest: remain seated. Nobody will mind; everybody will understand. The liturgy police will not come to carry you away to the slammer.

And know this: Everybody is only temporarily able-bodied. Gravity gets us all, sooner or later. Some day soon, I myself am going to have to remain seated, and have the bread and cup delivered to me. I'm even now preparing myself psychologically for that day.

OK. That's first. The functional, practical reason for standing rather than sitting at worship. You're simply more engaged, more intentional in what you're doing, than you'd be if you were slouching like a couch potato.

Now the second reason for standing. The symbolic reason. The pedagogical reason. The phenomenological reason. The reason for standing that speaks a word, that sends a message, non-verbally. Like the sidewalk preacher in that town park.

Actually, there are three of them. Three symbolic, pedagogical, phenomenological reasons to stand, rather than to sit, at worship.

The first of the three is this. Here's a test: What message is it sending, when you walk into a room full of people, and you see everyone sitting, but one person is standing? What's that a picture of? One person standing, all the rest sitting?

That's right: It's a picture of authority. Of a classroom or lecture hall. Maybe even a picture of a stand-up comedian entertaining a crowd. The person standing has something that the people sitting don't have, and the person standing is presenting it to them. The people are passive; they're an audience at a performance.

Now that's not the picture of Christian worship. It's a valid enough picture of what's happening right now. I'm your rabbi right now, and I'm presumably telling you something you don't know. So that's OK during a sermon. Or during the moments when there's readings from the Bible.

But the rest of the time – most of the rest of the time in worship – we're all on stage. We're all together, standing. You're not an audience, passive spectators. You're actors on stage.

Long ago the great Lutheran theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard made this point about Christian worship. We're all invited on stage. We're all invited to take a part in worship. So nobody sits. Unless you have to.

That's the first of these reasons to stand that send a message. Here's the second. Our cousins the Jews always stood – always stand – at worship to model the image of God. We're made in the image of God – the *imago dei* – and that's important enough to stand upright for, if you're able.

You recall that wonderful painting of Michelangelo's on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome? Here's Adam, just as he's created by the finger of God. He's reclining there at the left in Michelangelo's work, slouching in a languid torpor, and this swirling energy of God is exploding in a cloud from the right, stretching out a single finger that gives life. But after his creation, Adam is standing erect. Terrific pictures of the *imago dei*!

So our standing posture in worship recollects all that. Our standing sends that message. We are all made in the image of God. No sitting, no slouching, for us! We are God's supreme handiwork. We stand. We don't even kneel in worship, except on rare occasions.

There's a third pedagogical reason to stand, and it's fourth in my overall scheme. (I seem to remember that I told you this on another occasion, maybe during a children's moment here.) You're modelling the Resurrection!

What's the German word for Resurrection, the Resurrection of Christ? That's right: *Auferstehung*. And what does it mean literally? The standing up again of Christ. Same with the Greek word: *Anastasia*. And it means the same: The standing up again of Christ.

So when we stand at worship, we're not only modelling the image of God in us. We're also modelling the Resurrection of Christ in us. In Baptism we've died with Christ and we've risen with Christ. We're standing up to send that signal. Sitting, slouching, doesn't send the same signal, the same message.

You've guessed by now that I'm not paying much attention here to today's Festival, the Transfiguration. But let me make at least this comment. When I was In Seminary, now a hundred and fifty years ago, there was a minority opinion among Bible scholars that the Transfiguration represents a misplaced Resurrection appearance of the Risen Christ. I checked with Tim and he says it's still a minority opinion, but it's also still around.

But even if it is not misplaced, the Transfiguration is still a wonderful Preview of Coming Attractions, so to speak. This is what Christ will be like in his Resurrection. Hey, this is what *you* will be like in the Resurrection. So, Sunday after Sunday, day after day, you have the chance to be a Preview of Coming Attractions in your very body. Wow!

So if you're able, and as long as you're able, you stand up in worship. When you do, you're preaching a non-verbal sermon, a Wordless "Word", that's probably as convincing as this one I'm laying on you right now.

OK. That's the last of the message-reasons, the reasons that send a message, that preach a non-verbal sermon. There's one more reason to stand at worship, if you're able. That's the historic reason for standing.

Your Grandma stood. Your Great-Grandma. Your Great, Great Grandma. So did Martin Luther in the Fifteenth Century. So did Francis of Assisi in the Twelfth Century. So did Augustine in the Fourth Century. So did Jesus of Nazareth before the First Century.

Chairs and pews are a relatively late development in Church architecture. Chairs were a real luxury in Bible times. Jews always stood at worship. Early Christians stood. In the earliest churches there were probably benches along the walls for the aged and infirm to sit. Everybody else stood. Many Orthodox Catholic churches even today do not have pews or chairs – maybe benches along the walls for the aged.

If you've been to Chartres Cathedral in France even today, you know how they clear the chairs to allow access to a splendid, enormous labyrinth that's laid right into the pavement of the floor -- since the Twelfth Century!

Well, I'm out of steam. But there they are: Five good reasons to stand at worship, if you're able.

- 1 To show you're fully engaged, invested in what's going on...
- 2 To demonstrate that worship is not a lecture or a presentation, where you're an audience, but the whole action of the whole people of God for the common good, in which you have an irreplaceable role...
- 3 To model the image of God in you, since your birth....
- 4 To model the Resurrection posture of the risen Christ in you, since your baptism...
- 5 To honour, to give a nod, to Grandpa and Grandma and all the saints before you, who were not passive spectators in their life of faith, but active participants in a marvellous ongoing adventure.

An adventure that isn't over yet!