

Here I Stand, With You – I John 4: 7-12, 17-21
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska
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I cannot recall having as much of a challenge for a sermon as I have accepted for the one on this day. My challenge is combining Mother's Day, the observance of the 130th anniversary of the trial of Standing Bear, in which this congregation as First Congregational Church had a role, today's scripture, and doing it all in ten minutes.

The story of Standing Bear is new to me. Having read Joe Starita's book, "*I Am A Man*", I have an improved understanding of the importance of Standing Bear to not only the Ponca and other native American tribes, but also to every person who is in or has come to this nation expecting equal treatment under the law as guaranteed by the Constitution and Bill of Rights of the United States of America. I quote from Joe Starita in the final chapter of his book *I Am A Man*:

"I know it is important that we have our stories of George Washington and the cherry tree and Honest Abe the rail-splitter...But there are other stories worth knowing too...What is more American than loving your son and the traditions of your people so much that you would risk everything to honor a promise...this was a man who took on the U.S. government on a different kind of battlefield and he won. When you think about it, it's one of the best American stories we have. (I Am A Man, Joe Starita, St. Martin's Press 2008, p 235)

The words of Jesus and the writers that presented us with both the Gospel and the letters of our Christian testament are the same. They are stories of love. They are the stories of people taking on governments, cultures and religious beliefs of their day and time. They are the stories whose poignancy is as intense today as it was 2,000 years ago and through the centuries between then and now. They are stories about people but they are also stories about God. They

are stories about a God who does not differentiate between different tribes, cultures, or nations.

Today is also Mother's day, which is also a day of stories of love. What stronger love is known than a love of and for a mother? The love of mother is the most common and universal experience of love known, but there are other loves, and we Christians are expected to be greater than the limitation of one kind of love.

Frederick Buechner wrote these words in his work *The Magnificent Defeat*.

"The love for equals is a human thing...And then there is love for the enemy – love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world." (The Magnificent Defeat, San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966, p. 105)

Today is a day of recognition of love, and the courage to act in the ways of love, and challenge those that would defy and do battle with such ways. Today is a day when we recognize those who went before us and those who go with us, those who blazed out a life style and culture that has expanded the confines of the greatest, most honorable and most noble of all human gifts, the gift of courageous love that embraces more than the easy loves.

Even those who have never been to Hawaii know the word "Aloha." What you might not know is what it means. It is really two words. "Alo" means "face," and "Ha" means breath or spirit. It was the custom and culture of the Hawaiian people to greet each other by placing their foreheads together and breathing each other's breath. It was the breathing in of the spirit of the other that united and bound them together in love as the family of human life, even though unconnected by blood. By breathing each other's breath they acknowledged that it is the human spirit that binds us together far more than any other glue.

If you have been to Hawaii you have probably heard the word "Haole." Some believe it is a derogatory name for Caucasians, but it is not. When the European Caucasians arrived in Hawaii they would not participate in an

exchange of breath for, it was not within their cultural comfort zone. “Ha” means “breath” or “spirit;” “ole” means “no” or “without.” “Haole” means “people without spirit, people not connected with others in love.”

“Aloha” fits with Christian scripture. We are to be a people with spirit, and connected to one another in love. For mothers and their children, this is not a difficult challenge. For people of different cultures, races, beliefs, customs, dress, and sexuality, such connections require courage and commitment to build and become united as a human family. It requires effort and desire, and is well stated in the scripture with these words:

“If God thus loved us, dear friends, we in turn are bound to love one another.”

While reading Starita’s work of Standing Bear, I was taken by two stories. First, Standing Bear’s tolerance and stamina of not turning to violence, which may well have been understood by people had he done such. That behavior spoke of Standing Bear’s stellar character. The other story was the response of a large part of Americans. Though there were many that resisted an exchange of breaths, there were many who figuratively placed their forehead against Standing Bear’s forehead and breathed each other’s spirit. People, whose obligation was to enforce the orders of superiors in the treatment of the Ponca, spoke openly against the injustice and even involved themselves in the legal process to right the wrong.

Such is the call of Christian life. We are not called to affirm any injustice, regardless of custom or patriotic flare. We are called to be the body of Christ and be prepared to lay down our lives for those who are unfairly and unjustly persecuted. We are called to breath each others spirit and be united in that bond which unites us all – being a unique and wonderful creation of God, a creation embraced and delighted in by the one who created us all.

A story that has been credited to the Jewish Talmud goes like this:

Abraham and Sarah had a tent that was constantly being opened to strangers with great hospitality. They both knew that hospitality was a gift that came directly from God.

One day Abraham invited an old man to join him for a meal. When they finished eating the old man thanked his hosts for their fine gift. "You need not thank me," Abraham assured him. "Whatever I have given you comes from the God of creation. You must thank God."

"Why would I bother to thank your God when I have my own?" The old man said reaching into his pack. He drew out a wooden idol and set it on the floor. "This is the god who I intend to thank for taking care of me."

Abraham turned red and began to boil with furiousness. "How dare you worship a god made with hands," he shouted. He seized the man and threw him out of the tent. "I am sorry that I ever wasted my hospitality on you," he concluded.

Before the old man was out of sight Abraham heard a voice calling his name "Abraham, Abraham."

"Yes, Lord?" The patriarch answered, expecting words of gratefulness to flood his ears.

The voice said, "For 80 years I have protected and cared for the old man you just threw out of your tent. All this time, though he has given credit to his wooden idol, I have continued to claim him as my own. Abraham, I expected more of you. Go, find the old man, and bring him back. Make him welcome. You are expected to serve all people, not only those who believe as you."

And Abraham once again obeyed God.

From this day forward, may we all have the courage and stamina to do what Standing Bear and many of the people of Omaha, Christian, Jew, or neither, did 130 years ago - to say to those who face similar challenges of isolation and injustice today: "Here I Stand, With You." For this is what God expects of us.

Amen.