

From *This I Believe* to *Here I Stand*
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If you believe as many believers do, in politically engaged spirituality, and you're trying to save the environment; if you are persuaded that economic crimes can cause damage as extensive as the crimes of violence so endemic in the world today; and if you're an American trying to temper patriotic fervor with a healthy dose of national humility, you're bound at times to feel like quitting. But if Jesus never allowed his soul to be cornered into despair, and if it was to those furthest from the seats of power that he said, "You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world" – who then are we to quit "fighting the good fight of faith"? (William Sloane Coffin, Jr. *Credo*)

John 8:1-11

There are two ways to fight injustice. One is to name it and to develop organizations and systems to oppose it.

The other way to counter the evil in our world is to change our own personal behavior and say, "Here I stand. I will not do this." Both political action and personal behavior are important. Neither is complete without the other. Today I want to deal with the latter, to live in such a way that we refuse to participate in certain evils around us.

Consider the following story.

In comfortable, wealthy Millburn, New Jersey High School, bullying among girls has sunk to a new level. Here the most popular older girls have developed a "slut list" which they publish on the various internet social networks. The slut list names specific ninth grade girls and lists their promiscuous activities, however fictional, of sleeping around, lap dancing and even lusting after their own brothers.

This has been somewhat typical bullying behavior in schools for a while now. The insidious twist here is that the high school senior in-crowd is not trying to ruin the reputation of these younger girls by labeling them as sexually loose. Rather they are circulating these rumors to anoint them as the next clique of the popular and powerful. Tina Kelley, writing in the NY Times (Sept. 27, 09) quotes a recent graduate of Milburn High School as saying, "Being on the list means you are rich, you wear expensive clothes, and probably fall under the general umbrella of attractiveness."

While all bullying is bad, adding promiscuity as a criterion for popularity is terrible. It now encourages girls to use the most demeaning language to and about each other. Terry O'Neill of the National Organization of Women says the slut list language borrows from the worst ways the crudest men talk about women. Now it's not only okay for boys to talk this way about girls, but it is also just fine for girls to do the same. And the end result is that this language

excludes girls from a rightful, equal, and self-determining place in their community. They have to either be sexually promiscuous or have what was once known as a bad reputation to be accepted.

One way to deal with this kind of behavior is to take political action to confront the whole system that allows it. The school principal and other administrators who knew of the slut list and let it go unchecked have been chastised, sent to sensitivity training, and told that they must find ways to do something about this bullying or be fired. That's good. It's important. It should never be ignored.

The other way I spoke about earlier is to personally say when confronted with a situation like this, "Here I stand. I refuse to be part of such behavior, especially any kind of bullying."

While helping our children find strategies to deal with bullies and bullying, I think that we can also encourage our children and behave ourselves in a way that says, "I will not bully or be a part of bullying."

One way to do this is to recognize, regardless of our age or situation, the subtle and not so subtle forms of hazing and bullying that are part of the systems we live in. Whether in scouts, fraternities, bands, sports, camps, or our own job sites, there is frequently bullying by those who are in power. I am appalled to hear of the workplace cruelties and inequities many of you face.

Along with politically addressing the systems that allow this cruelty, we can also say, as a matter of faith, "Here I stand. I will not engage in this same behavior."

Listen to this story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, from the gospel of John.

While it's important to note that this chapter was probably not part of the original manuscript of John, the account of the woman caught in adultery clearly was an important story circulating in the church of the first century, still authentic to the message of Jesus.

So listen to this story as if you were hearing it for the first time. Listen to it as an occasion in which Jesus confronts a certain kind of bullying where the consequences of this bullying would mean death. How does he handle the bullies, who in this cause are the authorities?

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and he began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge brought against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

And once again, he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8:1-11 NRSV)

This story is a classic case of moving from "This I believe" about welcoming all people, even those excluded from society's protection, to "Here I stand".

Jesus' act of bending down and writing on the ground is not meant to intrigue us about what he was writing. Rather it was a way Jesus refused to engage in the Pharisee's argument. He refused to engage their bullying. By the way, this story is wrong about the Law of Moses requiring that only a woman caught in adultery be stoned. In fact the man was to be stoned as well. But Jesus didn't engage in an intellectual argument. He simply refused to be part of such a discussion. He stood up for the woman threatened, even at the risk of his own life, for it would not take much for a mob to begin stoning both of them. This is a moment of here I stand, of equality and inclusion.

John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopal bishop and prolific writer just sent out a manifesto, his here I stand. In it he says

"I will no longer debate the issue of homosexuality in the church with anyone. I will not longer listen to them tell me how homosexuality is an *abomination to God*.

"I will no longer listen to that strange and dishonest phrase 'we love the sinner but hate the sin.' That is nothing more than a self-serving lie...

"I will no longer seek to slow down the witness to inclusiveness by pretending that there is some middle ground between prejudice and oppression. There isn't. Justice postponed is justice denied...

"Homosexual people will be accepted as equal. Their marriages will become legal. There is no reasonable doubt to the final outcome..." (John Shelby Spong, "A Manifesto, The Time Has Come!")

As you saw in the Call to Worship, Martin Luther, a sixteenth century priest and professor in the only church that existed at that time said, "I can no longer abide popes and councils telling me how to interpret the bible and what to believe. Here I stand, I can do nothing other than separate from this church." He was refusing to accept and participate in a kind of ecclesiastical bullying that existed in the church.

His belief that everyone had a right to read the bible and determine their own faith was one of the seeds of religious and political democracy and equality in his time. Since his words coincided with the invention of the printing press, he laid the groundwork for the right of all people to read and think for themselves. He opened the way for a wave of reformers and dissenters to raise their voices against exclusive religious authoritarianism and for a democratic faith that became the Protestant reformation.

Let me give you an example of a "Here I stand" experience at UCG. A number of years ago Sandy and I led a high school overnight in which we sent out a notice to the youth group that a repressive government had come to power in the U.S. This new government had decreed that a church which allowed the free worship of God, however known, that welcomed people of differing understanding and theological opinion, and that acted in Christian concern for the welfare of all people was illegal. Its members must either deny inclusive faith or be jailed.

Our young people were given instructions to meet certain guides who would help them escape this repressive regime and find refuge in a safe house. Our particular safe house was a vacant rental property owned by Bob Atkins on Lake Geneva in Keystone Heights. The password that our youth had to use to identify the person who would whisk them to safety was "Pennsylvania (the Keystone state) High (as in Heights)". If they made the right contact, got the right response to their password, they were taken in a van with all windows covered to the Keystone Heights house where they spent the weekend exploring just what beliefs were dear to them and how they would stand for their beliefs as an underground, illegal religious community.

The trick was that a half dozen or so of our high schoolers were caught by the Sanford Berg and Stan Smith playing the role of governmental secret police. Sanford and Stan isolated the young people from each other, intermittently challenging their beliefs or offering them pizza and a chance to join their friends at a lake house retreat if they simply recanted their belief in the UCG compact. None relented. It was a pretty neat weekend. And we did, after a while, let them join their friends.

Thank of ways to express your own "Here I Stand.

For example, students have banded together to refuse bullying by forming Gay Straight Alliances in high schools around the country. And in so doing they have discovered that straight students standing up to say, "Here I stand" with gay students also decreases bullying at all levels.

While it might be old news by now, it's worth recalling that before this church voted to become an Open and Affirming church in the United Church of Christ, officially committing ourselves to welcome all people regardless of sexual orientation into every element of church life and leadership, we at that time said, "Do we have to vote? We know we believe in all people as equal. Isn't that enough?"

But we realized it wasn't enough. We decided to say, "Here I stand" and make our public commitment to being an Open and Affirming church, and it has made all the difference in our lives together.

Terry O Neill of the National Organization for Women asks us all, men and women, to stand up against the demeaning language increasingly used against women. Let's not let the insults, jokes, crude slang and b' word come from our lips.

Let's say to this language, I will not use it, "Here I Stand."

I encourage all of us to reflect on the places where we could move from “This I believe” to “Here I stand.” I know I want to do this in my own life, because I realize how easily I let my own commitments slide. As I challenge you in sermons like this, I also want you to know that I learn so much from your commitments and your courage. I need you to keep me growing.

As William Sloane Coffin said, given all that we struggle against, we’re “bound at times to feel like quitting. But if Jesus never allowed his soul to be cornered into despair, and if it was to those furthest from the seats of power that he said, “You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world” – who then are we to quit “fighting the good fight of faith”?

In our closing prayers I am offering sentences of hope for a better world with a moment of silence after each prayer in which you may offer your silent affirmation.

Let us pray:

O God we pray that human beings be measured not by what they cannot do but what they can do...

That quality health care becomes a fundamental right and not a privilege...

That the old divisions of race, gender, and sexual orientation die away...

That newcomers to our land and our lives be accepted no matter their color or place of birth...

That we as a nation stand against violence, hate and war...

That in our lives each day the work of love begins anew, the hope of love arises anew, the dream of love lives anew.

That for each of these hopes, we may say in our prayers and openly in our lives, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” Amen.

(Adapted from the prayers offered by Ted Kennedy’s grandchildren at his funeral, reported in the New York Times, August 30, 2009)