

*A sermon given on Sunday, July 4, 2010
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

The Standards We Bear

When I was thirteen years old I invested in my first riding lawn mower. It was a small rider with a 6-horsepower engine in the back. I mowed acres of grass in my rural Indiana neighborhood. By the time I was fifteen I had saved enough to move up in the world. My new machine was not a puny riding mower, but rather a Lawn Tractor. It sported a 10-horsepower engine, cut a 32-inch swath, and had a padded steering wheel and headlights. In my own mind, at least, I was very hot stuff. Curiously, there was something very different about having the engine out in front, instead of behind. That which is out in front of us seems to relate more directly to who we are. We project our identity out in front. It is the first thing seen. It is that which announces our arrival. It sets the image of who we are, or at least, who we aspire to be. A ten-horse engine under a sloping hood was apparently just the image I wanted at 15.

Think about other images which we put out in front of ourselves. At parades all over the country this weekend there will be lots of such up-front imagery. Out in front of the parade itself, of course, is the American flag. Individual groups marching have banners announcing their own identities: marching bands; local merchants; community leaders and politicians; civic groups and clubs of every sort. Each marches behind some banner or image, to tell us who they are. In the church, when the clergy and other participants enter the nave each week, we also follow behind an image announcing our identity: we follow the Cross of Christ.

The standard out in front, whether flag, banner, cross, or 10-horse engine, projects our chosen self-image.

In ancient times, rulers desiring to establish ties with surrounding peoples would send out ambassadors to represent them. These emissaries would venture into the foreign territory unarmed, for to carry a weapon before them would be to announce hostile intent. They bore instead some image declaring their credentials as an ambassador. In a preliterate age, this might have been some carved or painted likeness of their sovereign. By the likeness they bore, by what they did and did not carry, they projected the image of the one whom they represented.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus sends out seventy such emissaries into the towns where he himself intended later to go. Earlier in Luke's gospel Jesus had sent out the Twelve disciples with a similar mission. Now, apparently, he needed even more ambassadors to announce his good news. So, what did they carry as a sign of their ambassadorial credential? The seventy bore not a carving nor a painting. In fact, they themselves were the standard which Jesus projected out ahead of himself. They bore the image of Jesus by their words and deeds and manner. And what was the image which he sought to project through the words and actions of his emissaries?

The image was first of all one of mutual dependency. Jesus sent them out not alone, but in pairs. Two by two, for mutual encouragement and strength. In each village, they were to rely on the hospitality of those to whom they preached. The image was also one of simplicity. No fancy banners, no imperial or ecclesiastical clothing. Just the most rudimentary apparel of the day. Finally, the image was one of peace. This was the message which they were to proclaim first and foremost: "Peace to this house. The kingdom of God is so close you can touch it! Peace!" Mutuality. Simplicity. Peace. These were the

hallmarks of Jesus' identity – the flag, the banner, the 10-horse engine behind which he wanted his ambassadors to live and work.

Now, here is a paradox. We may choose to define our own image by what we put out in front of ourselves. But pretty soon the reality is reversed. The standard out in front of its adherents becomes known by the character of those who are behind it. The values represented by any standard are only as good as the followers who bear it.

The Christian Cross, for instance, represents many things – sacrifice, hope, and compassion among them. The Christian cross has portended genuine sacrifice in the slums of Calcutta; genuine hope in locations of disaster; and genuine compassion in hospital rooms and countless places of pastoral visitation. But the Cross has also been emblazoned on the Crusader's sword and shield; twisted onto the flag of the Holocaust perpetrator; and lit up at the Klansman's rally.

Our American flag, likewise, represents all our best aspirations of unity, liberty, and justice. The flag has been hoisted aloft as a standard of unity at Philadelphia; carries as a standard of liberty at Normandy; and stood as a standard of justice in our courtrooms and in countless gatherings by people of high conscience on the Washington Mall and elsewhere. But the Flag has also fluttered over the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans from their homelands; over a prison called Abu Graib; and over too many scenes of something euphemistically labeled "collateral damage."

The values represented by any standard are, I say again, only as good as the followers who bear it. This is true of our flag, and thus on this day, as we celebrate the gifts and blessings of our heritage, we also rededicate ourselves to the weighty responsibilities of our best principles: unity, liberty, and justice – ensured by an informed electorate, a citizenry willing to make sacrifices for those deepest principles.

And, like the Flag, our Christian Cross is only as noble as those of us who bear it. It is a sobering thought that now, this very day and every day, you and I are the ambassadors whom Jesus sends on ahead of himself. The Twelve aren't around. The Seventy aren't here. It's your job now, and mine. Paul says precisely this in his second letter to Corinth [5:20]: *We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.* The message has not changed. It is only the ambassadors who are different. You and I are the emissaries whom Jesus has out in front of himself these days.

So, here is the question today: What is the standard which you bear? What is the image which you both follow and embody? Is it a flag? Is it a cross? Is it a hood ornament? What is it?

There are many ways that we choose our banner. We choose it by the close identification with a cause we champion – with the commitments we make, and with the witness offered by those commitments. We choose our banner by the labels we claim for ourselves. Volunteer tutor. Gardener. Political organizer. Singer of lullabies. Baker of Loaves & Fishes casseroles. Red Cross blood donor. Harlan volunteer. Who do you say that you are? What is the labor of love by which your identity is announced?

Finally and most importantly, we choose our banner by our way of being: by our manner, our way of treating others, our patterns of concern or unconcern.

The commitments we make. The labels we claim. The patterns we live out. These say everything about the image we project to the world. A 10-horsepower engine and sloping hood may be a sufficient image for an adolescent boy, but we know that we must grow into more meaningful standards. Here is the task of discipleship – not only to follow the banner of Christ, but with God's help, to bear his image in the world.