The Way We Worship: Standing and Sitting

A visitor once labelled the amount of standing and sitting which he experienced in our worship as “Lutheran Aerobics”. We both had a good chuckle over his observation, but it did highlight that even something as simple as standing and sitting needs explanation.

The invitation to stand or be seated, along with other “instructions” concerning the service, are called “rubrics”. The word “rubric” comes from the Latin word for “red” and initially described the ornate first letter of medieval transcripts. These letters were written much larger than the rest and often in red ink. Later on, the instructions within the order of service were also printed in red lettering (though not with the same ornamentation). Thus, the name “rubric”... that is, the instructions printed in red! Since Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal has only black colored print, the instructions are given in italics.

The rubrics generally come in two different types: those things which a congregation is instructed to do and those things which are optional. In the former, the instructions will simply tell the congregation “to do” something. In the latter, the instructions will generally include the word “may”.

In the matter of standing and sitting, much depends on local circumstance. In an effort to work toward some uniformity of practice Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal rarely instructs that the congregation “may” stand or be seated. Nonetheless, congregational customs generally prevail in this rubric. The prevalence of local customs does not mean, however, that there is no “rhyme or reason” to standing or sitting.

Notice that the congregations begins in standing position. After the opening hymn the rubric simply states, “stand”. Not only does this invite the congregation’s private participation in the invocation, but also functions as an alternate posture of humility for confession and absolution (the preferred position for confession and absolution is kneeling, but only where kneelers are part of the church architecture). The congregation is also invited to stand in places of prayer, reflecting the normal posture for prayer in the Old Testament. For this reason, at the beginning of worship the standing congregation is not seated again until after the Prayer of the Day. The gathered worshippers also stand for the Prayer of the Church and Closing Collect. Traditionally, as a sign of respect for the words of Jesus in the Gospel reading, the congregation is also invited to stand for the reading of the Gospel lesson. Of more minor significance is the standing of the congregation for the recitation of the Creed, the singing of major canticle, and the receiving of the closing blessing.

I agree, without any instruction, our worship may feel like an aerobics class with all the standing and sitting. But both acts, standing and sitting, are meaningful ways of reflecting the message of worship in the actions of the worshipper.