Dear God, thank you for this bright and beautiful day; for the time to be together; for a church to nurture our faith and call for commitment; and for a sense of your lively presence. Now startle us with your truth and your word, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jerusalem has always been a hotbed of religious controversy, even before these first chapters of the book of Acts. Last week we saw the response when Peter preached his first sermon on Solomon’s Portico in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Maybe the best response ever to a sermon. Three thousand were converted, and everyone loved each other. Luke tells us that they spent time together in the temple, “they broke bread at home... praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number.” Not a bad response to a sermon!

There was someone else who gave his first sermon only five chapters later. His name was Stephen. Unlike Peter, he was not one of the original twelve apostles, but a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Luke said he was selected as a deacon ordained to the work of waiting tables, taking care of the widows, and the daily distribution of the bread to the poor.

You see, what had happened is that the church had grown so fast in so little time, that they had to get organized. It was one thing to distribute bread to 10 or 12 people; quite another thing to feed 3,000, because some of the Greek speaking converts weren’t getting fed. And so Stephen was one they ordained and put to work.

Now, as they served people, they told them the stories of Jesus. And that is what got Stephen in trouble. Some of the older religious leaders got into an argument with him, and they trumped up charges against him, blasphemy, sedition, and he was drug before the high priest and the council. Now, it’s obvious that he didn’t have adequate legal advice, this being a time before court appointed lawyers and all, and Stephen began an ill-advised sermon before his judges, starting with Abraham and working his way through the holy history of God’s saving activity, and it was going OK, until he got to Jesus.

And then he explained how Jesus was put to death by that very council whose hands, Stephen said, bore the stain of Jesus’ blood. Then things went from bad to worse when he called them a “stiffnecked people, forever opposing the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets.”

Needless to say, there were no converts that day, no community that arose to live in harmony, no goodwill that emerged among the people. In addition to not having legal advice, Stephen
hadn’t had Preaching 101, in which you learn “Don’t call your listeners a bunch of “stiff necked people.” So the council rushed on Stephen, dragging him from the temple and taking him outside the city’s walls where they stoned him to death.

OK. Here’s the question. Why didn’t Luke leave well enough alone? In the first chapters, as we saw last week, things were going swimmingly. And as I suggested, Luke wanted to let us in on the glimpses he got of the kingdom of God there in the church. This is what it looks like. This is what a resurrection faith, inspired by the Holy Spirit can do! Peter preaches and everything goes well, people care for each other and for the poor. But then Luke shows the other side: Stephen preaches, and it leads to martyrdom.

And it wasn’t just this sad episode that Luke tells us about. Remember the economic plan that the church developed, where they sold their goods and distributed what they had with one another? Well, it turns out that there was some fraud, or embezzlement involved. Ananias and his wife Sapphira withheld some profits from the sale of their property and then lied to the apostles about the money. Both suffered cardiac arrests and died, which cast a pall over the joyful spirit which had prevailed in the early church.

And then the apostles were arrested at the order of the high priest. They were flogged, which they considered an honor. And now there is Stephen who was killed for saying the wrong things to the wrong people in the wrong way at the wrong time.

So it turns out that the early church did have its problems. Dishonesty, scandal, and martyrdom… a far cry from a church living in harmony, enjoying the goodwill of all!

You see, if I were Luke, I’m not sure I would have included all these awkward details. They’re embarrassing. You know, the stuff about Ananias and Sapphira — too scary for the impressionable and for children, and too heavy-handed to be used for the stewardship drive. “You don’t give enough and look what happens!”

And the idea of church leaders being jailed? That’s not good promotional material for the image of the church. How would it look in the annual report: “We’re very proud of our leaders who were arrested this year and flogged just prior to their release.”

And what can you say about Stephen? Intemperate, uncompromising, using poor judgment about what to share in his personal witness to Jesus Christ. I mean, all he was ordained to do was to be a deacon, a server at tables and a welfare worker!

And yet, there they are in our Bibles, these stories preserved as a part of the record of the work of the Holy Spirit, evidence seen by Luke that the Spirit was guiding the church in its earliest days, and is guiding it still.
I wonder what it is that Luke sees that we do not see. After all, it doesn’t take a public relations consultant to tell you that if you want your church to grow you should emphasize the positive and eliminate the negative. One of the great “power of positive thinking evangelists” out west said that Lent should stand for “Let’s Eliminate Negative Thinking.” But there it is, the story of the joyful, exuberant growth of the church set side by side with the problems, the sorrows and sacrifices that the church experienced as well.

Why? Why not remember only the good stuff? My hunch is that Luke does not want us to miss the fact that it is sometimes costly to be a Christian, and that the church cannot be a hiding place from the threats of the world, but rather a place where the threats of the world are measured against a vision of the kingdom of God, and that that vision will get you through.

Imagine how this story of Stephen must have been compelling to those who suffered persecution in the early church, who had to ask why they should suffer. After all, if Jesus were the Messiah, the Righteous One of God, why wasn’t God showing a little favor on those who were his followers?

This stoning of Stephen had a major impact on one of the persecutors, one who hated the Christians, a Pharisee named Saul. But later on, after his Damascus road experience, after he changed his name to Paul, he wrote to the Romans, “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

Most of us, if we are faithful, will know some times when our faith is in conflict with the world and our witness will bear a price. It’s not easy. It doesn’t lead to martyrdom, at least in our country, but there is a cost. You know those girls who were abducted in Nigeria were taken because they were at a Christian school.

The confirmands last week and this week put a lot of time and effort...and heart...into their faith statements. I loved the honesty of so many affirmations. Margie Peeler wrote: “Dear God, I am still confused about who God is...but Idlewild is the place where I can stay connected with the church as I continue to grow.”

And it may have been just an exercise that you did and are glad that its over and now you can resume your life. But you follow these statements you wrote, there will be a price. We live out of sorts with the world’s values and it is sometimes costly. I still bear a few scars from not going along with the crowd in high school and later in the church as a pastor, not that its anything to be proud of, because more often than not, I’ve been silent. I want to be liked.

I can guarantee you that each of the young people confirmed this week or last week will have their faith tested, not just way down the road in the future, but while you are still in high school. You might hear some of your classmates making fun of someone who might be a little “different” from the mainstream. Do you join in? Do you ignore? Or do you befriend?
Can you imagine how inspired I was to hear Meredith Hood’s conclusion? “God’s love is for every one of us, form the person at More Than a Meal who prays for the dishwasher to the person at 201 Poplar to my Muslim and Jewish friends, to the gay couple who kiss before a Chick-fil-A.”

Scott Derrickson wrote an article a while back about the price he has paid as a Christian in being a filmmaker in Hollywood. After making a series of successful films, he was offered a seven figure deal for two movies in which he and his partner would write and direct. But the studio attached strings to the deal, and required an option for six other films at lower pay, about which Derrickson was suspicious. He feared that in spite of the lucrative start, he might end up making films that would violate his Christian values.

“Some Christians pride themselves on losing a job because they refuse to compromise,” writes Derrickson. “They consider it a moral victory when their integrity gets them thrown off the set. But it’s a sad thing to lose a job for any reason,” he goes on. “So I’m not saying, ‘Go out there and fail for Jesus!’ I’m just saying be willing to pay the price when you have to.”

Now, most churches don’t put in their membership packets a warning that being a Christian and a church member may be hazardous to your career, or injurious to your popularity, or make you uncomfortable at a cocktail party where everybody is telling jokes that demean women or belittle a racial group or those of a different sexual orientation. They don’t encourage that kind of thing in the church growth seminars “Keep it positive,” they say. “You don’t want to scare away the seekers.”

Not many of us are called to be martyrs like Stephen. Not many of us, in our lifetime will be forced to line up against the wall, given the final cigarette, and asked for the last time to deny our Lord in order to save our life. The larger issue for most of us who get up in the morning and head off to work and fill our days with coffee and appointments and telephone calls and Lean Cuisine at the end of the day is not so much the issues of what it is for which we are willing to die, but that for which we are willing to live.

Our faith is tested in countless ways that seldom call for martyrdom, but that do test in smaller, but no less significant ways, our resolve to love and serve the Lord. I think Luke knew that. I think that’s why he included in his history of the early church, in the book of Acts, not only the stories of the bright and happy days of the church when it was growing by leaps and bounds, but also the painful, sad, and heart wrenching stories of the church when it was sorely tested and some of its members were sacrificed for the sake of their vision of a kingdom that was dawning among them. Because Luke knew that there would be both times in the long story of the church, then, and now.

Stephen was the first martyr, but there is an interesting thing about that Greek word martureo, which is actually translated “to bear witness,” or “to give testimony.” So suddenly it doesn’t seem so far beyond our reach after all. Some martyrs, like a woman in Sudan this week, witness
to their faith by sacrificing their lives in significant acts of heroism, and others like you and me do so by simply living our lives as best we can giving faithful witness to the Lord we love day in and day out with what quiet and modest gifts we have. Unless I’m mistaken, Luke wants us to know that there is a place in the kingdom of heaven for both such witnesses, the faithful ones like Stephen who have died by the stone and the fire and the sword; and the ones who have lived each day as best they could in faithful obedience and thankful testimony to their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. So may be all be witnesses of our faith.

Amen.

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