

# STEPHEN

Fifth Sunday of Easter, a; May 22, 2011

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## ACTS 7:55-8:3

**55** But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56** "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

**57** But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. **58** Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

**59** While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." **60** Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

**1** And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. **2** Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. **3** But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

## PRAYER

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

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**D**espite the title of the sermon, it's not all about me!

However, in rereading this story of Stephen and what his obedience to Jesus Christ cost him, I was reminded of a poem that was written by one of my parishioners, June Shore, when I was first ordained over 30 years ago in Buckhorn, Kentucky:

*You must involve the wary teens—their needs must be attended,  
But not to such a great extent that the old guard be offended.*

*Take care in quoting from the Greek, lest you be thought "uptown,"  
Yet should you wax too folksy, you'll offend by "talking down."*

*With sermons swift and to the point, you short-change your little flock;  
Yet discuss a theme quite fully, and you're competing with the clock.*

*And if you preach salvation, you'll be slighting social action;  
But if you march for peace and love, you'll offend the Jesus faction.*

*The budget must be balanced, though the dollar takes a drubbing;  
Yet some think the tithing texts are just too "money grubbing."*

*Your dress should reflect at all times the dignity of your calling,  
But wear the congregational Christmas ties, no matter how appalling!*

*Be a sport (but not a clown) to appease the community sector,  
And wherever you go, don't tread on the toe of the venerable choir director!*

*In view of such behavior from the ecclesiastical mob,  
And in terms of pay and work load, can't you find a better job?*

Let it be said that not only has this ecclesiastical mob never threatened to stone this Stephen, one could not be more blessed to be the pastor of such a faithful and supportive group of followers of Jesus Christ. You continue to inspire and amaze me.

Today's story is of the stoning of Stephen, something I've never preached on before, partly because I didn't know what to say that would do it justice. But as I shared with you recently, I have been spending a lot of time with the early church in scriptures over the past few weeks, and I began to read this passage with new eyes. Because this is not only about what happens to Stephen, the very first Christian martyr, but also about what happens to a young man who is watching and approving and keeping an eye on the coats of those who are stoning him. And it is indeed a reminder that vocations—all vocations—can be costly as well as blessed; that there are no guarantees that good work will be rewarded appropriately every time.

Let me set the stage: Earlier in Acts, Peter stands before a crowd in Jerusalem on Solomon's Portico, and preaches a sermon. Just like that 3,000 are converted! And the Luke, who wrote Acts, tells us how that early Christian community "spent much 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 those who were being saved." That's a pretty good start for a group that only months before had been a tiny, frightened group of disciples hiding behind closed doors.

But there were growing pains, as there always are. It's one thing to be a loose-knit band of disciples walking from synagogue to synagogue in Galilee. It's another thing to be over 3,000 strong, cramming Jerusalem streets with no building, no organization, no staff, no computers, no stewardship campaign. Nothing, really, except a newly born passionate faith.

One of the first things they did was to get organized, not to have a revival or start a television ministry, but to make sure that everyone had enough to eat. That's admirable, but a formidable task, because in their lack of organization, some weren't getting fed, especially the Greek speaking converts, and they complain that the new church has to do something: get organized, form some committees, find some new leaders, and put them to work.

That's where Stephen enters the story. He is not, like Peter, one of the original 12 apostles. Luke simply says that he is a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and he is selected as a deacon ordained to the work of waiting tables, taking care of the widow, and the daily distribution of the bread.

It wasn't long, however, before everything they did became a hotbed of controversy (as things in Jerusalem, it seems have always been, even today!) Some Jewish leaders got into an argument with Stephen and they threw the book at him: blasphemy, sedition, all the old charges that people bring up when they feel threatened and afraid. They charged that he had slandered Moses and "the law" and God and the temple; and that this Jesus he followed would change the customs instituted by Moses too radically; so he was dragged before the high priest and the council. He didn't have adequate legal advice like he would today; for if he had, his lawyers would have told him to keep his mouth shut.

He didn't. Stephen began to preach an ill-advised sermon before the judges. It was a bible lesson going all the way back to Abraham. "You have your nerve to charge that I have violated Moses and his law—Get a mirror: look at you!" He works his way through the holy history of God's saving activity. Even as far back as Joseph there was conflict already within the family of Abraham. He recounts the story of Moses in loving detail and awe. He was demonstrating anything but blasphemy, but he reminds them that even Moses in his day got little affection, for even his own people refused to obey him.

Then he explains how Jesus was put to death by the very people who were sitting in front of him, that they bore the stain of Jesus' blood. And then he ended by saying something that any preaching professor would warn him against saying: "You're a bunch of stiff-necked people, forever opposing the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets."

Needless to say, Stephen's sermon (the longest in Acts) had a different result than Peter's sermon (which produced 3,000 converts). There were no converts this day, no community that arose to live in harmony, no goodwill that resulted in mission. Instead, the council rushed on Stephen, dragging him from the temple and taking him outside the city's wall where they stoned him to death.

In these two contrasting stories, we get a picture of how the early church developed, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and manifested in the witnesses of both of these early disciples, the one through successful efforts leading to a new church development, the other to martyrdom in the manner of Jesus himself.

The church didn't sustain those early joyful days very long. As a matter of fact, remember the economic plan to sell goods and feed people? It turns out that Ananias and his wife Sapphira embezzled some of the funds and then lied to the apostles about the money. And Luke reports that Ananias, and then a bit later Sapphira suffered cardiac arrest—Luke contends that the stealing and lying, and the subsequent deaths were not coincidental. I remember seeing a church that advertised itself on a billboard as a "New Testament church." I wonder if they mean dishonesty, scandal, or martyrdom.

Now here's what I really wonder: why did Luke put all these awkward stories in there? They're embarrassing. Church leaders stealing? Leaders of the church being thrown in jail? Could you see the annual report? "We're very proud of our leaders this year who were arrested in early January and were flogged just prior to their release." And Stephen? Though I like the name, he was intemperate, uncompromising, and used poor judgment about when and how to share his personal witness to Jesus Christ. He was ordained simply to feed poor people and wait on tables!

And yet they are in the Bible, preserved as the work of the Holy Spirit. Luke, I think, wants to show that the Spirit was guiding the church through it all, and is guiding it still.

But there is a footnote here, perhaps another reason that Luke felt called to write this down. When Stephen was martyred, there was a man there by the name of Saul who looked on with glee and held the coats of those who were stoning Stephen. Saul was filled with hatred for the Christians. This is the same Saul who later became Paul, converted on the Damascus road, the first and indisputably the greatest Christian theologian of them all. Saul would never forget what he heard that day, a young, faithful man dying for his convictions, praying with his last breath a paraphrase of an old Jewish evening prayer: "Lord, receive my spirit." Only Stephen prayed "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," as he died. Stephen forgave his executioners and Saul never forgot that. Augustine suggested that "If Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have had Paul." Who of us is ever aware of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the church?

So why did Luke include this story of the first martyr? Some think he included it to show how Stephen was a model Christian. I'm sure that was compelling for the early Christians, just as compelling as Archbishop Oscar Romero and nuns and priests who gave their lives for the faith in El Salvador. But I think there was another reason. I think Luke wanted to identify the thread of the presence of God's Spirit that runs through the story of the church in good times and bad, when the church grows by leaps and bounds, with great preaching and 3,000 converts, breaking bread in the homes, praying in the temple. But also in those times when those who are full of faith and filled with the Holy Spirit fall into the hands of deceitful people, dishonest people, taken outside the city and stoned, cloaks thrown at the feet of a hater of the church who will become one of its greatest leaders.

God has a way of working through it all, don't you see? Of turning it all around, of taking great tragedy and somehow fashioning newness and hope. God's Spirit is with us in everything the church has been and will be; in the great shining moments of harmony and growth and peace, (like last week with 10 new members and a baptism and a party on the playground) and in the wrenching sadness that brings sorrow upon the church. And yes, it's important for every one of us to realize that the church is an imperfect vessel, at times gossipy, petty, falling apart, torn by controversy and doctrinal dispute, subject to error at times when it strays from the Spirit of God. And yet always, always called back to witness to and exemplify the resurrection life of Jesus Christ of which on earth it is his body.

Look at it this way: All God has to work with are the likes of you and me, the Stephens and Stephanies, the Pauls and the Paulines of today. And there will be times we will blow it, maybe say the wrong things at the wrong times to the wrong people, to get ourselves into jams we can't seem to get out of, to take our assigned tasks and not do it as well as some others might.

But that is no reason not to try, not to do our best to be the church God has called us to be, imperfect as we are. For the Spirit is at work within us in ways perceptible and imperceptible and who knows save God alone what the end of these things will be? And if we look carefully, very carefully, even in these uncertain times, we will see the unmistakable movement of the Holy Spirit.

No, this story of Stephen is not about me. It is about all of us who are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and I, for one, wouldn't trade that calling for anything in the world.

Amen.

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