

Stephen the Superdeacon (part II)

Acts 6:1-15 Bill Chadwick

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In Acts chapters 6 and 7 we have this compelling story of Stephen, one of the first deacons. We looked at it very briefly last week and we will look at it some more today, but again, pretty briefly, and then finish up next week.

During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers—“Hellenists”—toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, “It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we’ll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we’ll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God’s Word.”

⁵⁻⁶ The congregation thought this was a great idea. They went ahead and chose—(seven men, including)

Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit,...

Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid on hands and commissioned them for their task.

⁷ The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith.

⁸⁻¹⁰ Stephen, brimming with God’s grace and energy, was doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them. But then some men from the (nearby synagogue) went up against him trying to argue him down. But they were no match for his wisdom and spirit when he spoke.

¹¹ So in secret they bribed men to lie: “We heard him cursing Moses and God.”

¹²⁻¹⁴ That stirred up the people, the religious leaders, and religion scholars. They grabbed Stephen and took him before the High Council. They put forward their bribed witnesses to testify: “This man talks nonstop against this Holy Place and God’s Law. We even heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth would tear this place down and throw out all the customs Moses gave us.”

¹⁵ *As all those who sat on the High Council looked at Stephen, they found they couldn't take their eyes off him—his face was like the face of an angel!* (from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*)

When I do officer training for our newly-elected deacons and elders I point to this passage as the institution of the office of deacon within the church. The church was rapidly growing and in Acts we read that the followers of the way of Jesus took care of those in need within the fellowship. By this time there were folks in the fellowship from two different backgrounds. Jesus and the first disciples were Jews who spoke Aramaic, a version of Hebrew, but as the church grew Hellenist Jews joined. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews, who had lived outside of Palestine as victims of the Dispersion under the captivity of Babylon and were influenced by Greek culture. They were often made to feel like outsiders by the Hebrew Jews, and sadly, this didn't change as they became followers of Jesus. The Greek-speaking Jews complained to the apostles that when the food was distributed to the widows that their widows were being short-changed.

The apostles recognized that that was not good, but they didn't want to take over the job themselves. We pick it up at verse 2 of Acts 6: "And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴ while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

The apostles recognized the need for specialization and their need to focus on what they had been called to do, to spread the word of Jesus. That's a good reminder for all of us, especially us pastors, to focus. It's so easy for us to get pulled away from our true calling, by countless emails, numerous meetings and hundreds of little administrative tasks. Sometimes I call it "being nibbled to death by minnows." I hope you will help Mary and Jermaine and me to keep our focus.

But, of course it's not just pastors. What is God calling you to do? What is your "vocation"? That word comes from *vocare* meaning "to call." It's not just our job, but it refers to the main thing God wants us to be about in our lives. Are you getting distracted by the siren voices of lesser things? Too much social media, shopping, sports...fishing? Focus. Not that any of these things is wrong in moderation.

So the Hellenists selected seven men, the first named was Stephen. What sort of man was Stephen? He is described as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit." He had a vibrant relationship with the Living God. The Holy Spirit is certainly the most difficult

aspect of the Trinity to get our heads around. I like to think of the Holy Spirit as “God in the Present Tense.” So, “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” With faith like that one can believe that all things are possible through Christ. And a verse or two later Stephen is described as “full of grace and power, (who) did great wonders and signs among the people.”

I love Lloyd Ogilvie’s description in his wonderful commentary on the book of Acts called *The Drumbeat of Love*. He writes: “The word *grace* has tremendous implications here. Stephen had been healed by Christ’s unlimited, unmerited, unearnable love. He was a released man. Defensiveness, self-justification, and competitiveness were gone...He had the disposition of Christ. Faith had gotten him started, grace had kept him growing, and power was the result.” (Lloyd Ogilvie, *Drumbeat of Love*, p. 88.)

Interestingly, Stephen was set aside as a deacon, to distribute food, but he immediately began preaching. He preached in his own synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen, the special place of worship and fellowship of Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, made up of Jews from all over the Middle East. “It was customary in that synagogue to raise and debate religious issues which were captivating the people.” (*Ibid.*, p.89)

Some “stood up and argued with Stephen.¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke....¹⁵ And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

Well, what does that mean, “like the face of an angel”? One commentator figured that if he had the face of an angel then he must have looked “ferocious,” that was his word—“ferocious”—because in the Bible angels are terrifying. (workingpreacher.org) I had never heard that before last week, but I wonder if he isn’t on to something.

However, I would guess most of us would think that description, “like the face of an angel,” would mean someone whose countenance was filled with peace and light.

There is some irony there. Who else in the Biblical record had a face that shone like an angel? *Moses* when he came down from the mountain after meeting with God and receiving the 10 commandments. He had to cover his face it shone so brightly the people couldn’t look at him. Stephen is accused of opposing Moses and the law, yet Stephen’s face shines like that of Moses.

Have you ever met anyone whom you would describe as having the “face of an angel”? (I mean, other than your spouse, of course.)

I have. Only once. I may have mentioned him before. I met him in 1985 at Holden Village, the Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. I was on staff there and he was an occasional visitor who would come for retreats. I've forgotten his name, but I will never forget him, especially his face.

As a young man he had traveled the world and ended up at a Benedictine monastery, intending to stay a few days as a guest. He loved the atmosphere of the monastery, the quiet, the discipline of praying, the celebration of daily Eucharist. He asked to extend his time, which was granted. Eventually, he told the abbot that he would like to become a Benedictine monk, do all the training and take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. However, there was one snag to this plan. He was a Lutheran, and he wanted to remain a Lutheran. After some time the abbot agreed to this and this man became I believe only the second Lutheran monk in the world.

When I met him he was pastoring a little Lutheran Church in a rural area of western Canada. He said that the church loved the fact that he was a Benedictine because of the vow of poverty. They couldn't afford a full-time pastor who needed the typical full-time salary. The little old ladies of the congregation, however, had trouble understanding the vow of chastity. They were always trying to set him up with their granddaughters or nieces.

When I met him he was about 34 or 35. He was about 6'2, with broad shoulders, long brown hair and he looked like...well, like Jesus, at least the Warner Sallman painting of Jesus. He was beautiful. He had the face of an angel. And by that I mean that he radiated light and peace and joy. All the women at Holden Village and all the gay men were in love with him. And I had a bit of a man crush myself, because he was so alive. Why? I believe it was because his days were filled with prayer ...and obedience. He prayed the canonical hours each day, starting at 6 AM and ending at bed-time. He was in constant communion with the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit. And as a result, he had the face of an angel.

So we have three examples here today. Let us be wise like the apostles, keeping our focus on the things God is calling us to do. May we, like Stephen, be bold and courageous in witnessing to Jesus. And like the Lutheran monk, may we be faithful in prayer and obedience, that we may witness not only with our words, but with our very countenance, embodying the peace and light of Christ. Amen.