

Stephen, the Superdeacon, Part III

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

May 14, 2017, Bill Chadwick

Acts 7:55-60 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

This is our third and final week on this passage—Acts 6 and 7, the story of Stephen the Deacon. I have a few more think-withs to offer you. But first, let's do a little recap.

When is this taking place? Very early in the life of the new church. The church is expanding. To the Gentiles? Sort of a trick question. Not yet. But to whom? The Hellenists, the Greek-speaking Jews. As the total numbers of the followers of the Way of Jesus—they are not yet called Christians—grew it required more people to do what? Distribute food to the widows. The Hellenists felt like their widows were getting short-changed, so seven men from the Hellenists—including Stephen—were selected to be in charge of the food distribution. They were ordained—set apart—by the laying on of hands and they were called “deacons,” from diakonos, servant. So all of you out there who have been ordained as deacons—raise your hands—are in a direct line from Stephen.

In the face of false accusations, the newly ordained deacon, Stephen, preaches a long sermon, outlining the history of Israel, showing how Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, but that he was killed, just like their ancestors had persecuted all the prophets. Stephen clearly spoke tactlessly, but fearlessly, and the crowd was enraged, believing that he was violating Deuteronomy 17 by worshiping a different God, this Jesus. As Jermaine read for us last week, the punishment for preaching a different God was stoning.

So we pick up the Stephen story at Acts 6:54: ⁵⁵ *But filled with the Holy Spirit, (Stephen) gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* ⁵⁶ *“Behold,” 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;* 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.*

Four things.

First, did you note the similarities between what Stephen says at his death and what Jesus had said at his execution? Now remember that this book, the Acts of the Apostles, is written

by Luke. It's a two-volume work: Luke-Acts. Unfortunately, when the editors were putting the Second Testament together they just threw the four gospels in there at the beginning in a rather random order. It would have been helpful if they hadn't separated Acts from Luke.

As many commentators observe, three times Stephen speaks, and each is an echo of Jesus, as recorded in Luke. At his trial Jesus declares to those who are taunting him, "From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69). In the face of his accusers, Stephen declares, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

"Just as Jesus in Luke's Gospel cries out from the cross, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46), so Stephen cries, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59). Finally, Jesus cries out from the cross, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34)." And just before Stephen dies, he kneels and cries out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" (Susan B. W. Johnson, *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, vol. 2, pp. 448, 450)

Stephen dies much like his Lord, with words of utter trust in God, and with astonishing forgiveness on his lips. What an example for us.

Stephen became the first Christian martyr. That word originally meant simply and literally "witness," but it quickly came to mean "one who dies for one's faith."

Which brings us to our second point. In a recent article, Princeton Seminary President Craig Barnes made what I thought was a fascinating observation. Noting that the church just kept growing during its most severely persecuted years, Barnes observed that baptismal liturgies preserved from that time, that time of persecution, are "essentially funeral services," (with language like "dying with Christ").

"Why were baptismal liturgies so focused on funerals?" he asked. "Because the church was persecuted. The early church wanted people to be unafraid, and the main way to be unafraid is to get the dying over with. You can't scare dead people—that's how the early church thought of themselves; that's what made them powerful." Barnes concludes, "I think we've lost something of that in our baptisms."

Listen to that again: "the main way to be unafraid is to get the dying over with. You can't scare dead people—that's how the early church thought of themselves; that's what made them powerful."

For many people around the world, dying for following Jesus is still a threat. On average 322 Christians are killed for their faith each month, with 772 acts of violence against Christians,

including rapes, beatings, abductions, forced marriages, and arrests. There are more than 65 countries where Christians are actively persecuted. (Open Doors website) As our own country moves toward fascism, Christians who speak up for justice may well find ourselves facing persecution. May we have the boldness and bravery of Stephen.

Third. There's that little line in this story. From verse 58: Almost feels like a throw-away line: *...and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

Now, just to review: this is not King Saul, whom many of us learned about in Sunday school, the first king of Israel and the immediate predecessor of King David. No, that Saul was 1000 years earlier. This is Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a learned man, had studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel. He knew the Hebrew scriptures the way Steve St. Martin and Bob Nesbitt know baseball stats. Saul was a Pharisee, a strict follower of the law, and he was a rising star in his religious circles, currently going from city to city throwing the followers of the Way of Jesus into prison.

“The witnesses laid their coats...” Why? So they could better throw stones. According to Deuteronomy 17, in a case of stoning because of blasphemy, the witnesses are required to cast the first stones. So, Saul wasn't doing the dirty work. It appears that he was merely the coat check guy.

But was he actually the brains behind the stoning of Stephen? Many scholars think so. (Lloyd Ogilvie, *Drumbeat of Love*)

Now, imagine what kind of effect Stephen's witness might have had on Saul. First of all, Stephen's “sermon” was a long recitation of Israel's entire history. That would have impressed the scholar Saul.

Second, Stephen's grace in the face of death, able even to ask God's forgiveness on his murderers. Can you imagine witnessing that? The most powerful Christian testimony I have ever heard was right here in this sanctuary a few years ago when we invited Mary Johnson to speak in our Adult Faith Formation time. Mary's son was murdered a number of years ago. Mary forgave the man who murdered her son. She visited him in prison. Now he's out and she lives next door to him in Minneapolis and treats him like her own son. That's real Christian faith right there, folks.

Finally, Stephen's countenance. Luke reports that the dying Stephen had the “face of an angel.” Who could long resist such a witness?

Two chapters later in Acts, Saul has his “Damascus Road” experience, encountering the voice of the Risen Christ. But we can surmise that Saul's experience with Stephen had

already softened Saul up considerably. No doubt the Holy Spirit was working on Saul, as he remembered and reflected on this encounter with Stephen.

After Saul turned over his life to Jesus, Saul was given a new name to go with his new identity: Paul. Paul, who became the greatest missionary in the history of the Church; Paul who wrote about half of the New Testament.

I have to think that without Stephen there may not have been a Paul. Years later, Paul was able to say with love and admiration, “Stephen, thy witness...!” (Acts 22:20) (*Drumbeat*) It’s very likely that Paul is the one who told Luke about Stephen and what happened that day.

Fourth and finally, we know this for sure. A few chapters later, Acts 11, we read that Stephen’s death had triggered a great persecution of the followers of Jesus, who then scattered far and wide. They fled their homes and homeland. But the unintended result was that they brought the gospel to lands that had not known it before. We read in Acts 11: “They traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, but they were still only speaking and dealing with their fellow Jews. Then some of the men from Cyprus and Cyrene who had come to Antioch started talking to Greeks, giving them the Message of... Jesus. God was pleased with what they were doing and put (the divine) stamp of approval on it—quite a number of the Greeks believed and turned to the Master.”

Because of the persecution triggered by the witness of Stephen, his compelling sermon and inspiring death, the gospel of Jesus spread throughout the entire Mediterranean and *leaped the religious barrier between Jew and Gentile!* One man’s faithfulness.

So in the long view of history we see that God the Holy Spirit took this horrible, personal tragedy and brought magnificent fruit from it. We can see that even through some of the worst things that happen to us, God is relentlessly working out her purposes. I’m not saying that God *causes* horrible things, but that God often is able to use them for good.

What an example of faithfulness we have in Stephen the Deacon. When life dishes out its worst on us, may we beseech the Holy Spirit to give us the attitude of Stephen, to give us grace, power, wisdom, obedience, that we will remain faithful, and that people will see through our lives the truth and the love and the power of Jesus!

Amen? Amen!