

Acts 6:1-14, 7:1-2a, 51-60,8:1a

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. 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, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us."

Then the high priest asked him, "Are these things so?" And Stephen replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 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. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 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. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 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.

And Saul approved of their killing him.

Luke 23: 33-34a, 46

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.

I love the book of Acts. It tells the history of the earliest Christian Church, and it shows that they were not a perfect congregation any more than we are. We see a group that was fractured along linguistic and cultural lines, between the Hellenists, the people who had previously lived elsewhere and spoke Greek, and the Hebrews, who were the home folks.

Now, the fact that this first congregation had its divisions and its issues did not mean it was not doing a lot of things very right. We could learn a lot from the earliest Church. They were so convinced that the Second Coming was coming, for example, that the rich gave to support their poorer brothers and sisters. They gave so much that no one in the Christian community went hungry, or, at least, that was the theory.

In this context, the Hellenists complain that the Hebrew people who distribute food are missing the Hellenist widows, people who depend on that food. They complain to the leaders of the community, the Twelve Apostles.<sup>1</sup>

The Apostles are the pastors and elders of a church that recently gained three thousand people in one day.<sup>2</sup> They are trying desperately to preach the word of God, baptize the new converts who are still coming in,<sup>3</sup> and teach all these people what it means to follow Jesus Christ. They know that this has to be handled, but they cannot deal with this. So, they delegate.

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, Twelve, not Eleven. Matthias was elected to replace Judas after Judas' death. Acts 1:12-26.

<sup>2</sup> Pentecost. Acts 2:41. The word is ψυχαί, or souls, not, as people are often counted elsewhere, men.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:47.

The Apostles find seven men to deal with this, the Church's first deacons. Judging from their names and the one home city that is mentioned, these men are Hellenists, members of the group that is complaining. Stephen has been a follower of Christ for some time and has proven himself; Nicolaus of Antioch is a proselyte, a non-Jewish convert to Christianity. The community choose these men. The Apostles, or pastors and elders, pray over them and lay hands on them.

As a side note, this is the Scriptural basis of our customs of ordination. Next Sunday, after the worship service and after prayerful consideration, this congregation will elect officers to serve and to lead us. On the first Sunday of June, we will pray over them and lay hands on them and ordain them to service.

Stephen quickly finds himself doing more than waiting on tables. He speaks with the people in Jerusalem, as one does, and the leaders of the Temple priesthood find themselves threatened by this upstart. He is pious, honest, and gracious. He treats those around him well, and he is seen as having spiritual power. So, following the same procedures that they did with Jesus, they fake up some charges against him, and bring him before the council.

I had the liturgist skip over most of Stephen's sermon before the council, because it is a whole sermon itself. He tells the early history of the Hebrew people and the biography of Moses. He points out to them that it is the Hebrew people themselves who have persecuted and killed most of the prophets whom God sent to them. He points out that they received the Law from Moses, who received it directly from God, and they have not kept the Law.

Suffice it to say, the council do not receive this in the helpful, pastoral spirit in which it is intended. They drag Stephen out of the city and stone him.

I have mentioned that crucifixion was a nasty, barbaric way to die. Stoning is not much better. The crowd, or, should I say, mob, throws rocks and beats the person with rocks until they die. This was the statutory punishment for the most serious crimes against the community and the social order: murder, blasphemy, adultery, and the like. Part of the idea is that the whole community has a literal hand in the person's death. The whole community is responsible.

In this case, the whole community is not involved. It is members of the council and their supporters. But they are enough. They lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, who approves of what they are doing. We will hear more about Saul later, under the name Paul of Tarsus. But that's another sermon.

Stephen imitates Jesus. He knows that he is going to die here, and he accepts that. He prays to God to receive his spirit. That is what we pray for a person at a funeral. He prays, asking God not to hold this sin of murder against the people who are killing him. And he dies.

So, what does this story mean for us, in twenty-first-century America?

I don't think that we have to worry too much about being stoned for telling the true story of Jesus Christ. Jerry and Linda and Pam can testify that being the Moderator of the Board of Deacons is not, thank God, in the Stephen sense, a terminal position.<sup>4</sup>

It means that we are called to follow Christ, and to do the kinds of things that he did. First of all, I'm not the only one here who is called. Your elders and deacons are not the only ones who are called. Every one of us is called by Jesus Christ. Every one of us made promises at baptism, or had them made for us, regarding answering that call. Every one of us, when we joined the Church, promised to follow Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Ridenour, Linda Bethge, and Pam Johnston are the last three moderators of the Board of Deacons in this congregation. All of them are alive and well.

You know that we are all called to love God and love our neighbors. But this is not an abstract thing. We are not called merely to intellectual agreement with some theoretical propositions. Believing in Jesus is not enough.<sup>5</sup> Each of us is called to follow Jesus Christ. We don't get to choose the destination or the route – he does that. He is leading. We get to choose whether we will follow, or not.

We are all called to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. We are all called to comfort those who mourn and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>6</sup>

We are all called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoner.<sup>7</sup> You'd have a hard time proclaiming liberty to captives and release to prisoners if you don't visit them, wouldn't you?

We are all called to forgive those who do wrong to us. Being a Christian does not make us immune to people doing us wrong, but it means that we are called to forgive them. Not only did Jesus forgive his executioners from the cross, but Stephen, who was a normal mortal like us, did the same thing. That means that we can do it.

Stephen had no idea what he was getting into when he accepted a position “waiting at tables.”

He took a position as a glorified waiter, and he ended up teaching many people what it meant to be a Christian.

He took a position as a glorified waiter, and he ended up preaching to the leaders of the Jewish religion.

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<sup>5</sup> Even the demons whom Jesus cast out of people did that – that was why they feared him. Surely, we are called to be better than demons.

<sup>6</sup> Jesus' first sermon that we have recorded, at Luke 4: 14-24.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25.31-41.

He took a position as a glorified waiter, and he ended up dying for the Christian faith.

He took a position as a glorified waiter, and he got to walk with Christ wherever he went, and see Christ before he died.

He took a position as a glorified waiter, and he got to be part of bringing the Kingdom of God to Earth, one person served at a time. One person helped at a time.

Given that amazing gift he'd been given, how could he fail to forgive those who did evil to him? Compared to how God had blessed him, what they could do was almost insignificant.

We, too, have been given many of those same gifts that Stephen received. We, too, have been called by Christ to follow Christ where Christ is going.

We, too, get to walk with Christ wherever we go, because he has promised that he will be with us always.

We, too, have been given the opportunity to teach the people around us what being a Christian is, by our example.

We may not be called to die for our faith, but each and every one of us is called to live for it. We may be surprised, as Stephen was, by where it takes us, but it will ultimately be for the good.

And we have the opportunity to be part of bringing the Kingdom of God, not only after we die, but right here, in our lifetimes. Every person to whom we are kind, every person to whom we truly listen, every person to whom we show God's love and God's grace, every person who sees God's love through us, is part of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Let God's will be done here on Earth, as we know it is in Heaven.

My brothers and sisters, we are truly blessed beyond measure. Let us thank God, and take those opportunities to be part of what God is doing right here.

AMEN.