

Let us pray: God of sacred story,
the words you speak have powers:
power to create, power to disturb, power to heal.
Help us hear your word for us today. Amen.

The story of the martyrdom of Stephen, is set in the greater story of Acts 6 and 7. The excitement of being the early church quickly changes as the “real” world comes more clearly back into view.

On one hand, the community becomes so large that a group of deacons, (including Stephen), must be appointed to help with the work of ministry in the Jerusalem church.

On the other hand, as the church grows, so does the number of people who are against it, and Stephen find himself challenged to a debate. When those he’s arguing with find that they can’t win, they stir up the crowd to make complaints against Stephen.

Stephen offers a wise and knowledgeable sermon, explaining over 50 verses (*Luke 7: 4-53*), of God’s place throughout history, but this makes them even angrier.

In the first verse of today’s reading, we read,
“...once the council members heard these words,
they were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen.” (verse 54)

But, in the end, Stephen is at peace, assured of the presence of Christ with him, even in this horrendous moment. He has no fear as the community drags him out of town and proceeds to stone him; The church has its first martyr.

A curious part of the story is that the people took off their coats, and handed them to a young a man standing nearby..

...maybe to give them a better throwing arm....

The young man’s name was Saul...and he would soon have his own extraordinary experience with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He would become the most influential Christians of all time.

In the meantime, he's happy to hold the people's coats and cheer them on as they throw stones at Stephen. Maybe he'll get noticed.

Earlier, the people had covered their ears, they didn't want to hear the message that Stephen was sharing about the true nature of God's love, a love that was present from the beginning of time.

Did they cover their ears because they thought they might be somehow changed if they listened to what Stephen was saying?

Their minds were made up, and it seems they could not risk hearing a message that might challenge their own ideas, ideas that were formed before they had all the information.

We, too, make decisions before we have all the facts. Sometimes we don't even want to know everything because we think it might cause us to change our minds and to maybe admit we were wrong.

Did some of the Roman people feel this way? They went along with the government out of fear. If they argued against those "in charge" they might lose their jobs, their money, their families, be thrown into jail...or worse.

But did some want more information about this new faith?

Would some common citizens have discovered more information if they were brave enough to ask questions about Jesus among themselves?

"Hurry! Shhhh! Come on, no one ever comes here.

So, who do you think he really is?

What does he want from us?"

Maybe they had heard gossip around town about Jesus, but who knew what was true or not..? Anyway, it was probably safer not to investigate any further.

This the world the church of the Risen Christ clashes with on a regular basis, and it's the world, our world, where we must stand up for, give our word, speak the truth. I wonder, can we do that with the certainty of Stephen?

This weeks' scripture readings challenge our commitment to Jesus' way as we think about the circumstances surrounding Stephen.

Not many of us are called to the ultimate test of surrendering our lives the way Stephen did. ...Yet we are all called to trust God through the situations in life that don't go according to plan.

Through deeper reflection, we think about our own period of history and identify those whose commitment to God has meant an early or violent death. - Martin Luther King, 4 nuns killed in El Salvador in 1980, and Bishop Oscar Romero.

The person that most comes to mind is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in a Flossenbug Concentration Camp, Germany. He was hung on April 9th, 1945just a few months before World Warll ended on August 14th. He was an Evangelical pastor, a theologian, and a resister. He died for his faith.

We think of some of the ways we allow suffering to continue by not hearing what others are saying. We believe we are right and there's no room for discussion. We cause pain with that thinking.

Like the first disciples, we want to continue to ask questions of faith, and look for ways to live out our calling as God's people.

And to actually see. To have a vision of the 'glory of God' puts Stephen in the company of Abraham, Moses, Ezekiel. Stephen says,

*"Oh! I see a heaven wide open
and the Son of Man standing right beside God!"*

It's this vision that puts people over the edge.

In the face of the crowd, Stephen delivers a message that accuses the people of rejecting the ancient prophets, and at odds with the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of dying, Stephen remains calm, and prays for his persecutors. Stephen's confidence reinforces the image of a spirit-filled church emerging with holy determination.

And still the Spirit is at work; the scattering only serves to spread the word of the gospel, and introduces the mission of church to the Gentiles.

Stephen's death becomes a pivotal moment in the story, signaling a major shift. The persecution now reaches beyond the Temple authorities and residents of Jerusalem. The vision had become a single, great community of believers.

..

A discussion of the story of Stephen's death is almost a reenactment of the death of Jesus.

The comparisons are obvious. Such detail. That is Luke's purpose.

Once again, the mob's frenzy compares to the experience of Jesus,
Three times Stephen speaks, and three times his words echo those of Jesus;

When Jesus is arrested, he is brought before the chief priest and scribes where
it's hoped he will say false things about God.

Instead of saying he is 'the Christ', he tells them, (Luke 22:69)

"From now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of God."

In the same way, Stephen's accusers also try and get him to say false things
about God. Instead Stephen has a vision of heaven.

Jesus cries out, *"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."*

Stephen cries out, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"*

Jesus cries out, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing."*

Stephen; *"Lord, do not hold this against them!"*

Once again, it's the death of an innocent prophet.

Often it's in our times of greatest struggle that we find our greatest growth,
although we don't feel it at the time, rather than in our moments of everyday
happiness when God goes almost unnoticed. Later we might, if we remember,
ask ourselves, "How did that make me grow? Everything's fine."

It's in our darkest hour, our deepest questioning, when we cry out to God,
we are reminded God cares for us with a liberating and un-ending love.

The story of Stephen is a reminder of that love.

Though Christians still die for their faith all around the world, many of us
won't feel like we have to give our lives for our faith. And though it might take
courage, protest marches, signing petitions and letters, even coming to a church
building makes a statement, we are still called to measure our priorities,
to take a stand, to express our faith through our actions.

We are wise to read Stephen's story carefully.

Let us pray; Be with us, God, our rock and our foundation.

Be with us when we are tempted to deny our faith.

And be with us, God, when we find ourselves

with a stone in our hand;

Help us not to kill with it, but to build with it. Amen.