

McCabe United Methodist Church

The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!

“When Things Get Worse Before They Get Better”

Sermon on selected verses of Acts 6:8 – 8:3 (6/4 & 6/5/16)

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Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

I spent several hours on Friday night working on my sermon. That's not, perhaps, the most exciting way to kick-off a weekend, so I posted on Facebook about how I was spending my Friday night contemplating St. Stephen, Christianity's first martyr.

My intent was to make people chuckle a little with the contrast: a very heavy topic on what, for many people, is a light-hearted evening to either go out or stay in, having fun with friends and family. Several people who saw the post appreciated my intent...they teased me a bit or at least got a good laugh out of it.

However, one of my best clergy friends and colleagues – a friend and colleague I can typically count on to join with me on a good laugh – commented on my post in a very *serious* way. He said, “The story of St. Stephen brings me to tears every time I read it. [It reminds me] how far I am from being the person God wants me to be.”

When I read my friend's comment it landed in my heart like a ton of bricks: *“The story of St. Stephen brings me to tears every time I read it. [It reminds me] how far I am from being the person God wants me to be.”*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a martyr in the following ways: one, “a person who is killed or who suffers greatly for a religion, cause, etc.”... two, “a person who suffers greatly from something (such as an illness)”...and, three, “a person who pretends to suffer or who exaggerates suffering in order to get praise or sympathy.”¹

1 Definition found at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyr> – emphasis added.

The last definition, wherein a person pretends to suffer, or exaggerates suffering, to gain praise or sympathy, was not the case with St. Stephen. We might refer to that particular definition by saying something like, “He or she has a bit of a 'martyr complex'.” We may know people like this, or we may see celebrities and public figures who embody this attitude:

they might experience some level of genuine difficulty, but they go overboard when describing their problem, or they make mountains out of molehills, or they may even fail to claim any level of personal responsibility for their own part in creating or perpetuating their problem.

That's not being a real martyr...that's having a “martyr complex” – pretending or exaggerating suffering in order to gain something personal.

A real martyr is willing to suffer persecution or danger because they believe their cause is just and worthy of their time, their energy, their passion...they will give their life for their cause – if it comes to that – because the cause is more important than their individual life.

A real martyr does not pursue their cause in order to draw attention to themselves...only to draw attention to their greater purpose.

A real martyr's time, energy, and resources will be prioritized to place their cause first, before anything else...and they are willing to accept sacrifice, pain, and suffering at the hands of those who do not support – or who openly antagonize – their cause.

Again, I think of my friend's comment: “The story of St. Stephen brings me to tears every time I read it. *[It reminds me] how far I am from being the person God wants me to be.*”

We were briefly introduced to Stephen in last week's Scripture reading, but I wanted to wait to actually talk about him until *this* week. Besides, last week's reading was chock-full of other important details:

Last week we had Ananias and Sapphira drop dead after cheating the church out of some money...and we had the apostles dragged before the Jewish religious council – some of them for the 2nd time...they were told to stop healing in Jesus' name and to stop teaching about him, period.

By this point in the book of Acts, some of the apostles had been thrown in jail multiple times for teaching about Jesus...and, in last week's reading, *all* of the apostles got beaten with a whip as a warning: the Jewish religious leaders at the time were deadly serious when it came to the apostles keeping quiet about Jesus.

Now, it's helpful to keep in mind that the Jewish religious leaders were in a bit of a precarious position because, at the time, the land of Israel was under the occupation of the Roman government and military. And Rome liked it best when the Jewish people knew their place...didn't try to stir things up or make trouble.

When Jesus was alive, and when he was healing and teaching about God's power, and about God's love for the poor and the outcast, the Jewish leaders got nervous.

They got nervous about what Rome would think if the movement of Jesus' followers grew too large. Would Rome think they were trying to start an uprising against them?

The Jewish leaders knew they needed to help keep the peace with Rome. Since they were under Roman occupation, they were already in a tough spot because they weren't free in their own land. But the Jewish leaders certainly didn't want anything to get *worse* with Rome, so they had to be very watchful.

Any hint of movement or uprising was cause for serious concern...which was, of course, a major reason Jesus himself was put on trial by the Jewish religious leaders and was, ultimately, crucified at the hands of Rome.

The book of Acts begins in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. At that time, Jesus' followers were waiting for a sign from God as to what they were to do next.

That sign came when, on the first Pentecost – 50 days after Jesus' ascension into heaven – the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, enabling them to share the message of Jesus in languages they did not know how to speak.

It was the first time that message was shared in a way that folks outside Jesus' own territory could learn about him. And the message of the Pentecost story is that God's love and power in Jesus Christ is for *everyone*: regardless of who you are, where you're from, or what language you speak.

From that point on, the apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the message of Jesus with anyone who hadn't yet heard it. They healed in Jesus' name and they taught and preached about Jesus unashamedly...and this did not excite the Jewish religious leaders.

Again, keep in mind, it had not been so very long before that Jesus himself had been executed at the hands of Rome because the religious leaders were concerned he'd cause them problems.

Now, the same concerns were bubbling up: even though Jesus had died, been raised, and ascended into heaven, his followers were now inciting the same kind of movement *he* had incited...and the Jewish religious leaders were just as concerned about the *apostles* as they had been about Jesus.

At the very end of last week's Scripture reading, we were introduced to Stephen. Stephen was one of those chosen by the early church members to help distribute resources to poorer believers so that all were properly cared for. Stephen is held-up as an example of selfless service.

However, he was *also* a brilliant teacher and preacher. In fact, as today's Scripture reading goes, we learn that Stephen got into many arguments with other Jews. These arguments were about who Jesus was and about how the Jewish people should understand him to be the Messiah for whom they'd all been waiting.

See, Jesus hadn't looked like the kind of Messiah for which the Jewish people had been waiting.

They'd been waiting for a mighty military leader who would kick-out any outside, occupying forces, and would then establish the land of Israel as their land, and their land only: a place where they could practice their religious laws in freedom.

Jesus hadn't done that. Jesus hadn't kicked-out Rome and, instead of practicing Jewish religious laws to a “t” he actually challenged them, encouraging people to live by the *spirit*, rather than by the letter, of the religious law.

As Christians, we believe God did a new thing in Jesus – that Jesus was God's way of telling the world salvation isn't about a particular place, or a particular set of rules...

But, rather, salvation is about turning our hearts and minds in complete surrender to God's will...and salvation is about accepting that Jesus came to be Messiah for the *whole world*, not just for particular people, in a particular place, with a particular set of religious rules.

Stephen's arguments with other religious folks about who Jesus was landed him on trial before the Jewish religious council. The high priest asked Stephen to verify what people were saying about him...and, though Stephen knew being honest could draw harsh punishment, he didn't back-down.

In fact, Stephen preached the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts – and there is quite a handful of sermons preached throughout Acts!

A couple weeks ago we heard the story about how members of the early church prayed that God would make them brave enough to keep preaching and teaching others about Jesus. They knew they could get punished for it, but instead of keeping quiet, they prayed for bravery.

That prayer for bravery was certainly answered and made plain through Stephen. He preached about Jesus before the Jewish religious council and, when he could see how angry he'd made them, he looked heavenward.

The good news of this Scripture reading is found in what Stephen saw when he looked up: the heavens opened and he saw God the Father with Jesus. In that moment, the vision was surely a reminder to Stephen that, no matter what, he would ultimately end up with Jesus.

And the vision came at just the right time because the religious leaders then attacked Stephen, dragged him outside the city, and stoned him to death.

As he was being stoned, Stephen prayed that God would welcome him into heaven...*and* he prayed that God would forgive his attackers.

If that rings familiar, it's because Jesus himself did the very same thing when he was being crucified: he gave up his spirit to God and asked that God forgive those who crucified him.

God calls each of us to be brave enough to tell others about the love and power of Jesus Christ...and that call is higher than anything – higher, even, than our own safety and security.

That in mind, I again hear my friend's comment: *“The story of St. Stephen brings me to tears every time I read it. [It reminds me] how far I am from being the person God wants me to be.”*

As I've said each week of this Acts series, the message of God's love and power in Jesus is for everyone – regardless of who you are, where you're from, or what language you speak. And, friends, there are a lot of people who have yet to experience the love and power of Jesus Christ.

This is why I'm so excited about our One Thing for June: as we prayer walk – or bike or run or drive – pay attention to the places and people you observe...notice. Where you see a lack of love, pray. Be attentive to any holy nudging God might extend to you. You never know what kind of opportunity God might offer as you prayer walk this month and beyond!

Like the early apostles, we are called to share the message of Jesus no matter what – even if we face dissent or danger. Thankfully, we can trust as Stephen did, that, no matter what, God *is* with us...and that we will ultimately end up at Jesus' side, in God's eternal presence.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into my heart and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.