

Opposing the Holy Spirit

It all started out so well. Jesus' ascension into the dimension of heaven meant Jesus would be everywhere all at once. The Holy Spirit blew in on the wind and with fire. The apostles – the same ones too scared to stand with Jesus at the end – told the story now in words that all could understand, no matter their language.

After a stirring sermon by Peter recounting the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, 3000 people were converted.

Jesus' followers shared things in common, selling their property so that all in the community would have what they needed. They shared meals and hungrily devoured the apostles' teaching.

In an astounding event at the Temple, Peter healed a crippled man. As the people gathered around, he preached again and thousands more joined the fledgling movement.

It all started so well.

But right after the Temple healing, the first ominous notes appear. The Temple authorities – priests, elders, Temple police – become concerned. They arrest Peter and John. Ultimately they conclude they can't kill them, but they tell them to shut up.

Of course they can't shut up. The Holy Spirit working in them is unstoppable.

Stephen is a new character in the story. He was appointed a deacon. One of the earliest squabbles in this new community called The Way occurred when the Hellenist widows complain that the Jewish widows are getting more than their fair share of the food and they're not getting enough.

That's notable partly because it's the first signal that there were starting to be non-Jewish members of the community. The Hellenists is the title given to the non-Jewish members of the community – the Greeks.

While the Romans of course ruled the Empire, the culture was profoundly shaped by the Greeks from when Alexander the Great ruled.

But it's also notable as the early church began to recognize that the apostles couldn't do everything and needed help. So seven deacons were appointed to oversee the ministry of caring for those in need. Stephen was one of those.

But, as you can see, Stephen had gifts beyond his ability to administer their feeding program. He too is full of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit has empowered him to do signs and wonders and preach boldly.

And again, the religious authorities don't like it one bit.

Unlike Peter and John in last week's story, Stephen doesn't fare so well. He too preaches boldly. He outlines how wrong Israel's leaders have been nearly from the beginning.

And he pays an awful price. Stoning is a horrific way to kill someone.

When you listened to Stephen's story, you should have heard echoes of Jesus' trial and execution. The false accusations...the sham trial...authorities hoping to stamp out this movement.

Even Stephen forgiving his killers. We didn't read Luke's version of Jesus' passion this year, but it's there that Jesus, while dying on the cross, says Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

Stephen truly followed Jesus right into death.

We're going to use this morning's story to look more closely at the forces that oppose the Holy Spirit.

First, let's make something clear if it's not already. This is not a dispute between religious people and non-religious people. It's not a dispute between Jews and non-Jews.

This is a dispute within a faith tradition – Judaism. It's a clash between the old tradition and this radical new movement sparked by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

I think that's really important for us. Because I think the biggest threat to the present-day Christian church comes not from outside. It's not Muslims or Jews or atheists or the unchurched.

It's from within – and it's not that different from the early church.

So, what are the leaders in this synagogue so angry about?

There's a trumped up charge of blasphemy. But there's more to it. Stephen has pointed out the wrongs of those in power in Israel throughout their history and into the present. And that's not something they want to look at. They are so sure they are right, they're willing to kill to settle it.

Can we tell what lies behind that deadly need to be right?

It doesn't say in this passage, but in previous passages we've heard that jealousy was part of it. The Jewish religious leaders were jealous of the popularity of first Jesus and now his followers.

But I think an even bigger one is fear. In the passion story of Jesus, we're told that the Chief priests and elders are afraid this little band with the revolutionary ideas would bring down the wrath of Rome.

But it probably goes even deeper than that.

Think about it...if Jesus really did rise from the dead, the consequences are staggering. It's a monumental upheaval not only for Israel but for the world. It can be very frightening when every solid foundation under your feet is shaken.

Driven by the Holy Spirit, Jesus' followers have jumped in whole-heartedly. But the old tradition does not want to let go. It's too scary. And all too often, the response of humans, even religious ones, is to stamp out the threat. Kill it if need be.

Early on in the church's history, the Way as it was called, was a courageous and very diverse group who came together to proclaim Christ. There were squabbles within the movement about the place of the old traditions. Circumcision was a hot topic in some of the early churches.

But historically, the biggest problem for the Christian church came when it grew enough to become the dominant religion in the empire. Then all too often, leaders in the church just slipped right into the same role the old Jewish religious leaders played – stamping out and literally killing those they believed had it wrong. Rigid doctrine began to push out room for the Spirit to work in ways that were surprising and new.

So where are we now as the church? The Christian church has been in existence for 2000 years. The Holy Spirit has done mighty works through that church...good works.

But opposition to the Spirit has continued. And that opposition has arisen among leaders in the Christian church itself. It's led to horrendous evil...inquisitions and bloody crusades. Church backed slavery, Jim Crow, lynchings. Emotional abuse of people who don't fit into the traditional church's idea of how things should be – LGBTQ+ people for example.

In the church at its worst, Christian nationalism is an ugly movement that is harmful to immigrants, minorities, and other marginalized communities. Which is especially ironic since the early Church was noted for its inclusion of marginalized people.

We can probably make a lengthy list of things in the church that have opposed the Holy Spirit – greed, idolatry, worship of power for power’s sake, hate, discrimination, and so on.

But underneath all that I suspect is the same thing that triggered those Jewish leaders...fear. Fear of change...fear of taking risks to reach out to those who are different...fear that the solid ground is shifting too much...fear of losing influence and power.

The result of that fear is the same today – digging in our heels and resisting any movement of the Spirit that might bring transformation. An aching need for black and white certainty at all costs. A need to stamp out those who would bring change.

And our call is the same as Stephen’s. Hopefully we won’t actually get stoned. But the true gospel of Jesus – the one of love and faithfulness...the one that’s good news to the poor – still raises hackles. And the work of the Spirit is still opposed by those who fear a spirituality that’s not based in rigid doctrine.

Last week I gave you the assignment to pay attention...to see those places where you believe the Spirit was at work, in the world around you, but especially in you. How many of you can say you were able to see anything like that? I’ll continue that assignment for the coming week.

But this week, also pay attention to places where you see forces opposing the work of the Spirit – either around you or in you. Next week I’ll have you write them down and we’ll incorporate them into the message.

We know that the arrest of Peter and John that we read about last week couldn’t stop the Holy Spirit. Even this horrendous stoning death of Stephen couldn’t stop the Spirit.

There are still forces opposing the work of the Spirit – sometimes those forces come from outside but sometimes they come from inside our churches and even inside ourselves.

We may not understand what the Spirit is up to. But we can trust that the Spirit is indeed still working and continues to be unstoppable.