

## WORSHIP MESSAGE

May 4, 2025

I must confess that when I first read the reading from Acts for this morning, my first reaction was, no wonder that churches sometime have problems recruiting people for committees, or to serve as deacons, or even spread the good news. Talk about no good deed goes unpunished!

It is often said if you want something done, not just in the church, that you should look to those who are already busy doing things, and ask them to do what needs to be done, for it is likely to get done. Well, it seems to me Stephen must have been busy, a person full of the Spirit and wisdom as he is one of the seven the 12 picked to wait on tables.

Now you may be tempted to take the phrase “wait on tables” literally, but it was probably meant as a bit of sarcasm by the 12. Remember this is the early church, and it is likely the 12 were feeling a bit overwhelmed by all that needed to be done. So they sought out seven men who could help them spread the teachings of Jesus and good news in the death and resurrection of Christ. And we learn in verse six that Stephen and the others have great success – “the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests become obedient to the faith.”

All seems good except there are some who are not happy about Stephen’s success and teachings. They accuse him of blasphemy, seize him and bring him before the Sanhedrin - the supreme council and court of the Jewish people during the Second Temple period, functioning as the highest judicial and legislative body in the land. This is a big deal!

What we didn't read in its entirety is Stephen's defense. His defense has been described by some as a brilliant sermon in which he turns the tables on the Sanhedrin, and in the end accuses them of resisting the Holy Spirit time and time again, and betraying and murdering Jesus. They are not happy with Stephen and they begin to gnash or grind their teeth at him. This does not perhaps seem so significant, except that this behavior often symbolizes anger, resentment, and rage. It is typically associated with the final judgment of sinners. And indeed they, the Sanhedrin, become so angry with Stephen that they drag him outside and stone him to death.

So, not exactly a story that would inspire others to step up and serve the Christian church is it? And yet, there are perhaps some lessons and challenges for us from the story of Stephen and his martyrdom for the early Christian church.

First is the reminder that we all have gifts – just like Stephen. From first Corinthians, we know that the church, as the body of Christ, is composed of many different members, each with unique functions and gifts given by the Holy Spirit. These gifts are not meant for personal gain or status, but for the service and building up of the body. There are different kinds of gifts. But they are all given to believers by the same Spirit.<sup>5</sup> There are different ways to serve. But they all come from the same Lord.<sup>6</sup> There are different ways the Spirit works. But the same God is working in all these ways and in all people.

<sup>7</sup> The Holy Spirit is given to each of us in a special way. That is for the good of all. <sup>8</sup> To some people the Spirit gives a message of wisdom. To others the same Spirit gives a message of knowledge. <sup>9</sup> To others the same Spirit gives faith. To others that one Spirit gives gifts of healing. <sup>11</sup> All the gifts are produced by one and the same Spirit. He gives gifts to each person, just as he decides.

Knowing that we all have gifts is one thing, it is another to discern what those gifts are in each of us, and yet another to put those gifts to work for the service and building of the community of Christ. Yet isn't this discernment and putting gifts to work happening at Czech Presbyterian, Grace, Zion, and Bethlehem? Lay leaders, just like Stephen, stepping up and putting a variety of gifts in to action for the benefit of each community of Christ. Very much like the early church.

I don't know that Stephen knew he would come to face the Sanhedrin for his success in building up the body, but he clearly put his gifts to work to build the early church. Just like each of us are called, Stephen answered the call to serve God, the church and all others. While it is true that taking up the cross may mean death, I am suggesting that we often hold back out of fear of persecution and ridicule rather than death. That we may at times be unwilling to let die that part of us which keeps us from fully answering our own call.

I believe that Stephen certainly knew he could be sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin when he was brought before them. And when death was certain, he prayed not only for his spirit to be received by the Lord Jesus, he also prayed for those stoning him, saying "Lord do not hold this sin against them." His last words. And then he died. Just like Christ who said, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

So, we are called by the persecution of Stephen and by the death and resurrection of Christ, to extend the same grace extended to those stoning Stephen, the same grace extended by Christ to those who persecuted him. Today, stoning, at least here in America doesn't occur, but it does occur here in other ways. Stoning occurs when we seek to malign, to do harm, to spread lies or gossip, to discredit, or undermine efforts to build the body of Christ, often out of a sense of righteousness. It is in these moments of modern day stoning we must seek to extend the grace

of our Lord, to seek grace for those persecuting us just like Stephen did. And when we do, when we pray for forgiveness for them, we may also be freed from our resentment and bitterness toward them.

Following the stoning of Stephen, that same day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Yet despite the death of Stephen, despite the persecution by Saul (who became Paul) against early Christians and the church, the good news spread throughout the region, and the body of Christ continued to grow. So again, through death to sin, not only is Christ resurrected, so is the church. So is the call to us, to continue the covenant God made with us in holy baptism:

To [live](#) among God's faithful people;

To [hear](#) the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper;

To [proclaim](#) the good news of God in Christ through word and deed;

To [serve](#) all people following the example of Jesus; and

To [strive](#) for justice and peace in all the earth

Easy words to say, hard to live out in our lives at times, but lifted up by the unwavering grace of God.

Amen.