

Stephen's Ministry
Acts 7:44-60

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You may have notice already in your bulletin that we will commission eight Stephen Ministers later on in today's service. The Stephen Ministry has been very valuable here at Sea Island. Those who are trained and commissioned as Stephen Ministers provide important pastoral care to members and friends during difficult times. They do much more than Steve, Jack, and I could possibly do by ourselves, and they are well-trained for the work that they do.

Stephen Ministry is named for Stephen who first appears Acts 6. After Pentecost, the early Christians began to organize themselves. There are many false teachings about Jesus, so they must protect the truth. The community of believers is growing, so they must minister to one another's needs. And persecution is increasing both from the Jewish Sanhedrin and from Rome, so they must protect themselves. The twelve disciples or their successors form a sort of council who must make sure all of these priorities are being met. When the work of ministry becomes too large for the twelve, they appoint seven others who will offer material and spiritual care to widows and other in need. Stephen, who is said to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit, is selected as one of these seven care-givers. (See Acts 6:1-6.) It is fitting that this care-giving ministry in our congregation is named for Stephen the care-giver.

Now, if you were paying attention during the first reading this morning, you heard another story about Stephen – a different story. I am sorry to say, on Stephen Ministry commissioning day, that Stephen's ministry did not last very long. In Acts 6:8, "Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." And in 6:10 he spoke with such wisdom that no one could speak against him. By Acts 7, however, Stephen has been seized and brought before the Jewish High Priest and the Sanhedrin to answer accusations that he has been speaking against the law and the temple. Stephen gives a lengthy speech, and by the end the council is so enraged that they rush at Stephen in an angry mob and stone him to death.

I suspect this is not the story you wanted to hear about Stephen today if you are a Stephen Minister! How does Stephen's story turn so quickly? Why is he beloved one moment and despised the next? And what about his death? What significance might it have for followers of Christ living in the United States in the 21st century?

One reason for Stephen's demise may have been Stephen himself. He is called by the twelve disciples because he is known for being full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He adds followers to the fold because of he does wonders and signs among the people, presumably things like feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and casting out demons. But when Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin he does something different. Jesus, before his ascension, tells his followers to be his witnesses – to tell what they have seen and experienced in him. At the Sanhedrin, Stephen stands up for his faith in Jesus Christ, as he should, but he does so without the wisdom and grace he is

known for. Before the Sanhedrin, Stephen does not witness, he lectures. Instead of showing care for the Sanhedrin, he insults them by repeating back the history of Israel (as if they do not already know it). He rebukes them for failing to obey the law, and finally he accuses them of killing the prophets all the way up to Jesus, the Messiah. No wonder they were enraged!

Stephen's life and his death remind Christians today of what it means to be a witness for Jesus. "Witness," like "evangelism" is sometimes a taboo word among mainline Protestant believers. We do not want to be rejected by more secular acquaintances or business partners, so we prefer to keep our faith personal and private and allow others to do the same. We allow our children to "make up their own minds" about matters of faith rather than coercing them to adhere to the tradition of the family. Yet Acts reminds us that the call of the Christian is to be Jesus' witnesses at home and far away. First Peter declares that the very purpose of the people of God is to proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness and into light. How do reconcile our cultural preferences for silence on matters of faith with the mandate the Scriptures to proclaim what we have seen? Perhaps Stephen's last moments have a lesson for us.

In the last moments of his life when he is surrounded by the angry mob, Stephen has a vision of Jesus seated at the right hand of God. Stephen witnesses the resurrected Jesus reigning in power, and then he is equipped anew to witness to Jesus amid the people who are persecuting him. Stephen does not preserve his life, but in his dying moments, he becomes a true witness to the true Christ when he prays that the Lord will not hold this sin against them. We remember that from the cross Jesus also forgave those who put him to death (Luke 23:34). We remember that after his resurrection Jesus gave his followers power to forgive sins saying, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven" (John 20:23). Stephen, a man full of grace and power, dies carrying out his call to be a witness – to tell what he has seen and experienced in Jesus, not through words but through the act of forgiveness. Stephen's proclamation was most powerful and effective not when he lectured and rebuked his audience, but when he did good deeds and pronounced forgiveness.

The power of the gospel is not found in rhetoric but in service. Our witness is not rooted primarily in what we know about Jesus but in how we have experienced his power in our own lives. Like Stephen, when we get caught up in debates about doctrine or behavior, we fail to look for Christ around us and make his way incarnate in our own lives. Stephen's vision of the resurrected and triumphant Christ was a reminder for him of what shape his witness should take, and it led him to seek forgiveness for his persecutors. We, too, need to look for signs and reminders that Christ is indeed present and powerful so that our witness will reflect the dying witness of Stephen. We must examine our own lives and recall how Christ has brought us from darkness to light. We must understand the ways the Holy Spirit has been at work in us to shape our character. We must remember the ways God, in his faithfulness, has guided us through difficult times. These experiences are the source of our witness, and acts of service, grace, mercy, and forgiveness make up its substance.

A second reason for Stephen's death has nothing to do with Stephen himself. This disciple of Jesus was living in a world extremely hostile to the Way of Christ. In those early days of the church, Christians were a minority group within Judaism, itself a minority faith within the pagan Roman Empire. You might say that sectarian violence between Christ-following Jews and

Christ-rejecting Jews was on the rise. Sharp rhetoric often gave way to violence as one minority group sought to protect itself in the face of a challenger. Roman persecution of Christianity lay a few years in the future, but it would be a reality by the time Peter wrote his first letter to the Christians in Asia Minor. Stephen's death may have been simply a sign of his times, unavoidable regardless of the quality of his witness.

We do not live in a time and a place like Stephen. In our nation, even as secularism and pluralism increases, Christians remain the majority group and the rule of law in our land is based on Judeo-Christian principles.¹ Religious violence in the United States is much more likely to be directed toward Jews or Muslims than Christians.² And while some Christians in the United States feel their expression of faith is suppressed in civic spaces, none can reasonably fear they will be executed by the state for sharing what they believe. So if we can overcome the social taboos of "witnessing," if we can rely more heavily on service than rhetoric, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ should be safe and easy, right?

No, we all know it is not so easy. Many of the common assumptions and practices of our culture clash with the mandates of the gospel. In a culture that tells us to prioritize our needs and those of our immediate family, a life of service to others can be difficult to sustain. In a culture that promotes the constant accumulation of new and better stuff, a simple life that trusts the provision of God is called "unsuccessful." In a culture that believes in rigid justice, litigation, and retribution, forgiving someone who has hurt you badly seems unpatriotic.

The ministry of Stephen is not just something a few well-trained members of the congregation do when they offer pastoral care to neighbors in times of trouble. The ministry of Stephen is something we are all called to do as we witness to Jesus Christ through our acts of service, grace, and forgiveness – even in the face of a culture that urges us to conform to its norms. If we must rely on our own strength to carry out this mission of proclamation, we will surely fail. But we do not look to ourselves; we look to Jesus, risen and powerful, to sustain us in our ministries. We do not build God's kingdom on our own strength or ability; in fact, we do not build it at all. God is building his kingdom, we simply offer our lives to be laid like stones upon Jesus who is the chief cornerstone. Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame!

In the name of Stephen and of Jesus Christ, may you taste the goodness of the Lord and share it. Amen.

¹ According to one Pew Research study, roughly 78% of US citizens claim affiliation with some Christian tradition. See <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations> for more information.

² <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/our-work/fighting-discrimination/2008-hate-crime-survey/usa/iii-violence-based-on-religious-bias>