

One is Enough

A Sermon by The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

Easter 5; Acts 7:55-60; 5/14/17

Lord, as we listen to your holy Word, open our hearts to the power of your spirit, call us out of darkness, and lead us into your marvelous light. amen.

Well, they'll stone ya when you're trying to be so good
They'll stone ya just a-like they said they would
They'll stone ya when you're tryin' to go home
Then they'll stone ya when you're there all alone
But I would not feel so all alone
Everybody must get stoned.

The congregants at the church I have been serving as Interim Rector in Jalisco, Mexico know that I am often fond of quoting nobel peace prize winning poet, Bob Dylan, for there is often much truth in his words, and as in all poetry, more than one interpretation. Everybody must get stoned. Just like Stephen, the saint known as the first martyr in the church.

We often think of Stephen in terms of his logistical skills in finding an answer to the problem of how to feed all of the widows and orphans. You follow his example here at St. Peter's through the Stephen ministry. Some serve by showing hospitality, some visit the sick, some preach and some teach, and others are good administrators. And in this way

everyone does the ministry of telling the world about Jesus. But Stephen was not only a good administrator, he was also a gifted preacher.

In the 7th chapter of the book of Acts we find one of the most powerful sermons of all time. Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin, the highest council in Judaism; before the high priest, and he preaches from his heart and soul. He must have been nervous, I would think, to be preaching to such an audience.

He begins with Abraham and an account of God's call to him. He continues with the stories of his descendants through Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. They are stories of obedience, of testing, of suffering. He tells of the liberation of the Hebrew people who became enslaved in Egypt; of the prophet, Moses, who led them in response to God's call to him. Stephen tells the story of the days of wandering in the desert wilderness and their arrival in the promised land. He tells of David and Solomon, who built a home for God even though God told the people that he could never dwell in a home made of human hands. There's no problem yet, the Sanhedrin has heard all of this before, they know Jewish history, this is nothing new.

But then Stephen starts wielding verbal blows. He dares to speak truth to power. "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and

now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” And those words enraged his audience. He was speaking now about them. But Stephen didn’t stop there. He continued with his personal witness as he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God; as he saw Jesus. That did it right there. Talking about Jesus is sure to get you stoned every time. Then his audience covered their ears. They couldn’t bear to hear his words. They couldn’t bear to hear about Jesus. They were vicious as they lashed out in anger. Even as Stephen asked God to forgive them, they stoned him.

And they will stone you too. You don’t get stoned for being silent and you don’t get stoned for staying at home watching TV. You get stoned for doing ministry. Ministry is not easy. It is about caring for others and feeding the hungry but it is also about standing up for the marginalized and speaking out for justice. It is about being a good steward of God’s gifts and running the church in a healthy and efficient manner, but that isn’t all it’s about. It’s about answering the call of God to go places you would rather not go and doing things you would rather not do and speaking words that might tend to inflame your audiences. It is a 24/7 calling, something like motherhood. And we are all called to ministry in some shape or form. We are called by virtue of our baptism. Sometimes we are ordained and sometimes we are not. It makes no difference.

There are times when it seems that nobody notices the ministry you are doing or even cares; times when it seems that your efforts are having no effect on anyone. It's easy to feel discouraged. Sometimes we may wonder why we are called to do ministry at all. That's when we need to remember one little detail in Stephen's story. There was a young man in his audience. That young man was named Saul. And it is Saul that this story is really all about. For Stephen's words may not have been heard by any of those for whom he intended them. But they were heard by one person for whom they did hold meaning. His words did touch one person, Saul who later became Paul. And that was enough.

You don't have to change the whole world. Babiana Xavier, a woman who lived her life virtually unknown, changed the life of just one person, my friend, Nancy. Bea had no children of her own but, as a surrogate mother, she made Nancy feel loved and cared for. Last week Nancy showed me the photo album she made as a tribute to her. Bea, not terribly attractive, but with a big smile on her face, in a simple housedress with her arms encircling a young child; Bea, standing next to Nancy at her graduation from high school, Bea living in one room in a nursing home at the end of her life with one photo on her dresser - a photo of Nancy. Like you, I had never heard of Bea, until last week, but now I know her because she made a difference to one person.

A friend of mine in Mexico tells the story of standing in line for a movie in Detroit when a staff member rushed out of the theatre in a very

excited manner because he had heard my friend was there and wanted to find him. He saw him and came up to him and said, “You taught me English at Oakland Community College. You changed my life.” What my friend had done was help this young man give expression through words to something he loved and cared for, a Datsun 2000. My friend had taught hundreds of students, but never had one of them told him that he had changed their life. He made a difference to that one person.

Our mothers, whether our actual mothers or someone who has taken on the role of mother in our life, mold us in profound ways. My friend, Mary Miller, we called her Boo Boo, who lived in this community and died just a couple of years ago, adopted a young girl who needed a mother. A year after her death, that young girl, Alyssa, posted this on Facebook, “On this day, one year ago, I said good by to my greatest supporter. Not one day has passed since I haven’t thought about Mary.” Mary made a difference to one person.

For 13 years, as a member of this church, I listened to a preacher, Doug Culton, and his words changed my life. They led me on a long journey, and they always brought me back to my center, back to Jesus.

It’s easy to forget that all it takes is one person whose life you have touched. And you may live your entire life never knowing who that one person is. I doubt that Stephen had any idea whatsoever that the young man, Saul, standing there listening to his words and watching the actions of his peers, would influence the course of Christianity, a term not even

known to Stephen. I doubt that Stephen could have anticipated the impact that his words would have on this one person. He was simply preaching what was in his heart. He opened his mouth and shared the vision of the glory of God that he had seen with his own eyes. He preached Jesus even though it meant his own death.

What is the vision of the glory of God that you have seen with your own eyes? Where have you experienced the love of Jesus? Someone out there needs to know, in whatever way you are called to tell the story. Tell it out loud and don't be concerned if they stone you for telling it. It may be your actions that speak as you march for justice or it may be your sacrifice to care for another. Our actions show the love of God better than any words could possibly do. Sometimes it is our song, or the gift we give, or the way we motivate others. In your ministry, you don't have to change the world. If it only makes a difference to one person it is enough.

And, that is the good news. To God be the glory.