

The Risk of Seeing Too Soon

Text: Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:54-55

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
Matthew 23:37

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Acts 7:54-55

The early chapters of Acts document that beautiful community that the Spirit created. A community of harmony. A community of sharing and caring, of praying and praising. Such an idyllic period. So pregnant with the presence and the power of God. But it didn't last very long because that community of the Spirit was also a community of people. The Spirit doesn't just float ethereally out there somewhere but always indwells God's people. So where there are people, there are problems. The Spirit that creates community is always a Spirit that tends to push and nudge towards newness, eliciting from that same community resistance and conflict. There are sparks that fly. We find that, after the portrait of that initial harmony and wonderful beauty that characterized the apostolic community, we have a serious conflict that centered around Stephen.

Stephen was appointed to administer the community, to take care of some of its details, some of the necessary things that had to happen in that growing community. But before long he went to preaching. Stephen was probably the outstanding leader of that early community. We hear of other names, Peter and James and eventually Paul, that are more familiar to us. None of them were earlier and none of them had more insight into the universality of the Gospel and the promise of Pentecost than did Stephen. So before long Stephen became the spokesman of the truth that came to expression in Jesus and he found himself following dead in the tracks of Jesus.

He elicited the wrath and the hostility of that Jewish community that had not yet gotten over its reaction to Jesus. The criticisms and the condemnations sounded very much the same. That Stephen and his ministry of the Gospel was

undercutting the centrality and the sacredness of the temple, that Stephen was playing fast and loose with the law of Moses and the customs that came through that law. So they called him before the council and asked him whether the charges, (that had been trumped up, and yet that had an element of truth in them) were indeed true.

Stephen's defense was most unusual. He took them on a rather lengthy survey of the history of God's people. He was characterized by Luke as a man full of the Spirit, powerful, and full of grace. As he stood before the Sanhedrin Council, the leadership group of Jewish people, they looked upon him and (it is recorded), they saw, as it were, in Stephen the face of an angel. With great persuasiveness and power he reviewed that history which was a history of stubbornness and obstinacy, disobedience and rebellion.

Stephen was a Samaritan. We know that from an analysis of the history course that he gave them in that address. He had the Samaritan bias. If you had heard the history of Israel from St. Paul, a Hebrew of the Hebrews with blue blood in his veins, you would have heard a different nuance to that history. But Stephen being a Samaritan reflected the Samaritan bias. Interestingly he brings the story to a conclusion by a reference to the building of the temple.

You see, the Jews and the Samaritans had this ongoing conflict because the Samaritans never really yielded to the fact that Jerusalem was the city of God. It was the tabernacle, the tent, the moveable sanctuary that accompanied Israel through the wilderness that was brought into the promised land and was placed first at Shechem. Shechem was in the vicinity of Mt. Gerezim. Then David who came to power as the second king of Israel, in order to unite the south and the north, conquered the fortress of the Jebusites and founded Jerusalem as the new capitol, a very clever political move.

Of course, David being king, all of the court preachers exalted this wonderful move on David's part as though it was all of God's doing that Mt. Zion should be exalted forever. But the Samaritans, the northern tribes, never really bought that. Remember the woman at the well, the story that we looked at last week? She said to Jesus, "I foresee that you are a prophet. Now where should we worship, here at Mt. Gerezim in Samaria, or there in Jerusalem?" Jesus said to her, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshiper will not worship either here *or* there, but in Spirit and Truth."

Maybe Stephen was a convert to Jesus through the testimony of that woman. In any case, he had the Samaritan bias that didn't really "buy" Jerusalem as the only site where God dwelled. It probably is true as they charged that he slighted somewhat the temple and all the accouterments of that sacred shrine. He saw before the rest of them what Jesus was really talking about. He understood the promise of Pentecost, the breaking out of those narrow ethnic national limitations and structures and forms, and the universalizing spirit that was now poured out on all flesh. As he concludes his history lesson, he brings it to this

contrast between the tabernacle that was the moveable tent of meeting, the worship center for pilgrim people, contrasting it with that fixed temple in Jerusalem. His charge, the thrust of his history lesson, the point he's trying to make, he says with conciseness,

“You do always resist the Holy Spirit! You like your forbearers do always resist the Holy Spirit. What you really want is a fixed temple, a solid form, when the Spirit prefers the tent and the tabernacle that can be folded down, mobile, free, fluid.”

As he brings his point home using that image, they can't miss the point. They are those who have it all wrapped up - in a solid temple, in a thick liturgy, in established priesthood, the last word, the final form. Stephen, from Samaria, through the eyes of Jesus says, “You're doing it again. You are doing what our forbearers have always done. Always resisting the Holy Spirit.” Reflecting the words of Jesus as he addressed the leaders of his own people, confronting them with a paradox, the irony that they bring wreaths to the tombs of the prophets that their forbearers killed, knowing that they will soon kill him as well. He proclaims to them the irony of the religious who lust for certitude and fixed forms and always resist the Spirit that would break the forms, that would create newness, that would move God's people into God's open future.

It's a risk to see too soon. Stephen paid for his early vision with his life. He saw as Jesus saw and he died as Jesus died. It is a risk to see too soon.

Let me play a little game with you this morning. One of the best ways to hear the word of God in the biblical story is to put oneself in the story, to identify with one or another of the characters. I know when we come to church, we may take for granted, presume that we are a part of the people that wear white hats, the good guys. So you might say to me, “Obviously I can identify with Stephen as I would have identified with Jesus over against those obstinate, blind, stubborn, rebellious Jewish leaders, who were always resisting the Holy Spirit.” But, wait a minute. The story isn't about blind, obstinate, stubborn Jews of a former day.

This is our story. I ask you, “With whom do you identify?” Might you image yourself pulling a chair up to the council table as a member of the Sanhedrin, checking this man Stephen out? As a guardian of the tradition and, therefore, examining, interrogating this preacher of strange creed.

Or there are a couple of other possibilities. Saul, who was to become Paul, we are told, was standing by, holding their coats as they stoned Stephen. Maybe you sense that you might be one of those, standing on the sidelines, seeing what's going to happen.

Or I suppose there might be one or two of you here that might honestly see yourself joining the lynch mob, taking up the stones. Where do you see yourself in the story? Because the story is not an ancient tale of days gone by. It is as fresh as

today. What Stephen was talking about was simply the phenomena of human religion. You say, "Religion? I thought religion was divine?" Well certainly, in the sense that it is a response to God. I believe that human religion is not generated out of the human person. I believe it is the response of the human person to that encounter from beyond. The response takes a form. The response takes shape. The response takes a certain institutional character.

What Stephen was talking about in his review of Israel's history was a review of the people who served the true living God, the creator of heaven and earth. They had true religion, but it was religion constituted by human shapes, and human forms, and human formulations. It was those human shapes and forms that they wanted fixed and final. The whole point of Stephen's speech was: We were better off when we were a pilgrim people in the wilderness than when we got it all together here in the promised land. We were better off when we needed occasionally a charismatic leader to come in and lead us rather than when we got this monarch, this king, this established palace and this established temple, where everything was fixed and final.

Oh dear friends, we people love to have it fixed and final. Make it simple. Make it clear. Give it to me easy. Let me get my hand around it. Don't leave any loose ends. Don't leave me dangling.

The human situation is a situation that isn't neat. It's messy. It always has loose ends and dangling participles. Stephen was saying, "The Spirit of God is the Spirit that always pushes us to newness. We who are religious always resist the Spirit of God."

Jesus said, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem." (Stephen's image too for that which is solidly fixed) "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how oft' would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but she would not." Jerusalem that kills the prophets. Not Mecca, not some place in the oriental kingdom of the Far East - Jerusalem.

All the blood from Abel - Genesis, to Zechariah - II Chronicles, the end of the Jewish canon. The whole Jewish canon from beginning to end, from A to Z. You killed the prophet, the one called by God to speak God's word. You resist the Holy Spirit."

So Stephen paid for seeing too soon, for seeing through, seeing the promise of Pentecost which Jesus had pointed to, the era of the Spirit.

I was thinking about this this week because I had lunch with a friend of mine, a very dear friend of mine, a friendship that goes back over decades. We were in college together and seminary together, and a pastorate overlapped. We studied in Europe at the same time. But in the last twenty-five years I've only seen him three times. We had lunch this week. We started out together. We manned the same "foxhole" in the theological wars of our youth. He is still faithfully manning

that post, and I have gone off the charts to the left of him. Now if he didn't love me so much he would never sit down to break bread with me. But the reason we had lunch was because, after a quarter of a century of being separated, he has just accepted a call to pastor a congregation in Grand Rapids - the most conservative congregation in the Reformed Church in America. Intentionally, deliberately so.

When he called me for lunch he said, "You aren't thought of very well in my congregation." (Laughter) I said to him, "I know." He said, "When we have lunch maybe we should both go in disguise." (Laughter) But there we sat. Loving each other still. Respecting each other deeply. He, standing where he has always stood, responsibly, passionately. I, with equal passion and seriousness, believing that in order to serve the same cause that he serves so well, I must do it otherwise. Is he right and I am wrong? Am I right and he is wrong? It's not that simple really. I believe in him. And I know that we worship together the same good and gracious God even though we are poles apart.

What is it with this community of faith, which is always being nudged by the Spirit into newness? Where do you take your place? You see, we are in the era of the Spirit trying to realize the promise of Pentecost. Now it seems to me that if we would move toward the Messianic Age, Shalom, and the Kingdom of God that we have to find that form to which the Spirit is inviting us. We call Jesus, Christ. *Christ* is the Greek word for *Messiah*. *Messiah* is the Hebrew word for the *anointed*. The Messianic Age is the age of anointing. We have identified with Jesus. Jesus Christ. But Jesus was simply the instrument. The instrument. The one who was anointed and promised the anointing of God's people.

I wonder if, in the history of human religion in response to the true God, Israel was a stage issuing in Jesus, issuing in the Church. But I am wondering if the Church hasn't gotten locked into Jesus, forgetting that Jesus is the one anointed, promising the anointing of us *all*, leading us into the next stage whatever shape it may take.

I don't know. There is a certain risk of seeing too soon, of getting a sense of something. There is a peril of seeing too soon. But there's a greater peril for the people of God in not seeing soon enough. Where is the Spirit of God leading us? What is the Anointing Age, the Messianic Age, the Age of the Spirit? What form will it take, and what place will we play in it? Would you stand with Stephen? Or do you sense now, pulling a chair up to the council table, feeling called rather to be a guardian of the tradition? Or maybe you are sort of on the periphery with Paul holding the coats of those who are slugging it out.

Pray God you're not reaching for a stone.