

Are You a Martyr?

E-5A

Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-14

April 20, 2008

Acts 7:55-60

55 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.

56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.

58 Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

John 14

NRS John 14:1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

4 And you know the way to the place where I am going."

5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

6 Jesus said to him, "I am the **way**, and the **truth**, and the **life**. No one comes to the Father except through me.

7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

I. INTRODUCTION

What we have just heard in the Gospel of John is the most frequently read passage at funerals today. Taken from the ***Farewell Discourse of Jesus***, his words are most powerful ***because*** they are some of his ***last thoughts*** to be shared. Soon Jesus gives the *ultimate* witness of his heavenly father on the **cross**.

These words of Jesus are important and powerful precisely because they are among his **LAST WORDS**. My experience in 30 years of ministry is that we are the most attentive to what someone says to us, when we know that the words spoken to us are the last words that we will probably hear from that person.

I can remember many a person who spoke to me in their final days. And, I still feel the incredible impact their thoughts have had on me, even to this very day.

The words of John Wesley, the human founder of the Methodist movement in England, for instance, after fifty years of leading a reform and renewal of the Church of England and the beginning of a new church in America, said at his last hour, ***“The best of all is this, God is with us.”*** Then, he repeated that same phrase in his last breath, ***“The best of all is that God is with us.”*** Wesley knew the power of Resurrection, as surely as his brother, Charles had written in his great hymn – ***Christ, The Lord Is Risen Today, -- Ours the cross, the grave, the skies Alleluia!***

Similarly, **Stephen**, whom we meet in **Acts 7**, utters much the same thought as Jesus did in his hour of greatest witness from the Cross: ***“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”*** (Acts 7:60b) The words of Stephen’s beloved master left an indelible image on those who followed Jesus. ***“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”***

This vivid scene of Stephen being martyred with the persecutor, **Saul**, looking on, begs the question, ***“What will be the witness of the Christian community when it feels itself being persecuted?”*** Will the church today emulate the witness of Stephen? Doesn’t Stephen’s words and action move us to a higher spiritual response to

violence and bigotry? One writer describes the scene of Stephens's death as, "a picture word of rest and calmness which stands in dramatic contrast to the rage and violence of the scene."

Standing near to this violent scene is Saul, who, with the permission of the Sanhedrin –the main ruling body of Jerusalem Jews-- acts illegally to put the Deacon, Stephen, to death. "The death of Stephen was a murder, instead of an execution, because (1) no vote of the Sanhedrim was taken, and (2) the consent of the Roman governor, requisite to capital punishment, was not obtained."

II. BIBLICAL SCENE

Can we imagine the scene? At first **Peter** preaches to the crowds—to the people that come from all over the world, who are gathered in Jerusalem at the Temple for the **Pentecost** Festival. He preaches to Jewish leaders boldly without any trace of the former fears that he had been known for. And, the response of the crowd was amazing. They believed the simple story of Good News that God's Son, Jesus, had suffered, died on a cross in humiliation and was raised from the dead to be exalted to the right hand of God. The story stirred their hope in the Messiah.

This simple and straightforward message produced an **unbelievable positive response**. Thousands believed in Christ and became *believers*, joining the bold movement of the ***Way***. Peter and others demonstrated signs and wonders—miracles of this word they proclaimed so boldly and powerfully.

Now, contrast the ***ministry of Stephen*** to that of Peter. He also is a disciple of Jesus. His name means ***Crown or Wreath***. His witness is a **crown** for ***Christ*** in the world. Though not one of the original twelve Apostles, he is one of seven, who had been selected, in the early church community, for ***special service***. He was one of the **original deacons of the church**. A deacon, then, as now, is one who is called to “***serve***.” That is precisely what ***deacon Stephen*** did. He served tables! The task was so important to the life of the gathered community that it became a ***consecrated order***. Today, in the UMC denomination we have the ***Order of Deacon***. Deacons serve in special ways other than preaching and serving the sacraments.

Always, however, the ***Deacon*** is called to **serve** as a **witness** of the ***Gospel*** of Jesus Christ in compassion and love. Deacons, like ***Stephen***, have a ***ministry of service*** to the ***poor***, the ***neglected***, the

hurting, the **sick**--all God's creation who are **in need** the acts of Good News in the form of service.

Yet, Stephen was received in almost a diametrically **opposite way** than that had been portrayed in **previous** weeks of **Peter's ministry**. While Peter's words about Jesus seemed to produce great fruits of **success** to the glory of God, **Stephen's** witness is received with **hostility** and violence. Accused falsely, Stephen is tried, convicted and immediately **stoned** to death.

His **witness** in the face of the hostility and hate, however, is that of a person ***filled with the Holy Spirit*** of God. Stephen did works and wonders not unlike Peter; but **in the face** of mean and cruel, rejection, he acted like Christ. His **witness proclaimed *divine mercy***. He **exemplified** the ministry of **Christ** who **serves** those who **hate** and **abuse** him. He **loved** his **enemies**; he **blessed** those who **persecuted** and hated him. He did **not yield** to the power of **evil**; instead he yielded only to the ***power of God***. Stephen **served** God in life and in death. He showed the journey of a faithful servant from ***life to life*** in Christ.

In a stark contrast to Stephen's calmly kneeling and yielding himself to the Almighty, the crowd rushed onto Stephen and executed

him violently, without just cause or reason. Then, the **violators** lay **Stephen's garments** at the feet of the **chief persecutor**, as if this is a tribute and spoil of the conquering **power of violence**.

III. IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

Why didn't the **Christian Way** just come to an **end**, right there at the foot of Saul? **What** happened in the following days to the early Christian community was **not** unexpected or unreasonable. But, **was** it not God's work to flourish their work in the face of such opposition?

The **effect** of the violence on **Deacon Stephen** and others was to **drive** the Christians **out** of Jerusalem and **into** the **far corners** of the **world**. It might well have been the intention to disrupt and destroy the Christian work. But, that was not to be the result. Thus, the mission of Christ became **transformed** into a missionary **movement** **beyond** the Jewish community, **far beyond** the confining **boundaries** of Israel and the limiting ethnic Jewish Law of the revered Torah.

Now, **Gentiles** would hear of Christ. Now **Greeks** and **Romans** would become part of the **New World** order in Jesus. Now the **Great Commission** could become a **reality** as Christ intended. Remember how Jesus gave final instructions: **go into the entire world to**

preach the Good News, baptize and to teach. In this surprising way God **transformed** the **rejection** of His beloved Son **into a mission zeal** for **all** people, in all places in all times. The **Christian message** would **not be restrained** but had to be **open** and **inclusive** of all God's children everywhere throughout history.

As John 14 said, ***“Believe in God, believe in me.”*** (Speaking of the work and mission of Jesus as the Messiah) The Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the flock, **offers abundant life**. That is the **choice** that Stephen **made** and **offered** in his ***submission*** to his enemies. Stephen, facing death offered a better choice; **choose life—life in Christ**.

The ***word*** of God may **not** be received so easily in the hearts of hardened and violent people. The Gospel has the potential of **arousing** deep-seated ***hostility***. Deaf to all reason and words and acts of **love the attackers** respond with a ***thirst*** for ***blood***. What will be Deacon Stephen's ***witness*** now?

You **know** the answer. It is the **only** answer a faithful servant of a crucified and risen Christ can make! ***Stephen*** is **focused** on ***mercy, not revenge***. The rule of most of the world is ***blood revenge***, which is what we witness in Palestine and in Israel today.

Blood revenge is the Old Testament ethic of ***an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth***. It is blood revenge that nurses hate that says to the victim, “***Do not ever forget and do not forgive.***” Could it be this revenge attitude, so deeply rooted in our culture, makes the end justify the means, no matter how ugly the means might be employed or how attractive the end might seem? Remember that concept changed with the **New Testament** ethic and example of Jesus.

Revenge perpetuated a violent cycle of more violence. Where does it end? Can we say, when we face the challenge of retribution – whether in war or in court – “***What would Jesus do?***” How would our asking that question change our response to violence acted out against us? If Jesus is the **Way**, the **Truth**, and the **Life**, then not to follow Jesus in these most difficult and challenging times would make our witness no less powerful and valid than the secular world that screams for violent retribution. Not to follow Jesus would lead to death, not to life. Again, we must ask, until we can see a different kingdom rule in our being, “***What would Jesus’ Kingdom look like in our world today?***”

I was deeply moved by the witness of **Rachel Scott’s mother**, **father** and **stepfather** at the funeral in Littleton, Colorado, following

the tragic murders in Columbine High School. They witnessed in **words** and in their **attitude** and **behavior** that the power of death could **not bind** them. They proclaimed life, knowing full well that their daughter lived and died in that belief in Christ. Who cannot be touched by their witness? Isn't this the kind of witness that we really need to hear and to emulate? This is a powerful and life changing witness, like the **last words** of the one who died, kneeling before those who would stone him unjustly or of the one hanging upon a cross and forgiving those who did not know better.

Among the **last words** spoken to me at the bedside of a man dying in the hospital was his testimony of trying to make peace with his neighbor who hated him. He asked his wife to invite the man to visit him. He asked the man to make peace with him. And he did. He did this because he asked himself, "***What would Jesus want him to do before he died?***"

Is it possible to **change** a hostile mind into a compassionate, loving witness of Christ? Now, look toward the **witness** God made through the ***Persecutor of Stephen—Saul***. He was bent on purging from this world any witness of this so-called Messiah, but he found instead that God's work was **not** finished in the stoning to death of

Stephen, but **only** beginning and will become realized in time. It would be God's time that would reveal the Truth that brings life to this broken world. It would be in God's time that Saul, soon would become Paul, the great Christian missionary, and would transform hate and hurt into hope and peace, even for the murderer himself.

CONCLUSION –Do want to be a **martyr**?

A **martyr** is a **witness**. When the church of Jesus Christ gets up out of the pew and steps out into the world, the followers of Jesus Christ become instantaneous martyrs. And, a martyr never knows how that witness will be carried out or how it will impact others. The only task is to BE A MARTYR.

What does one single martyr mean to the salvation and healing of a broken world? Alone, we may seem not to matter. Alone we may seem rejected and powerless. But, we never know who is taking our witness seriously!

Through the ages, men and women have revealed in simple and humble ways the inner depth of spirit of Christ to others when it was most needed. Can you think of someone whose words or actions have revealed a holier and lovelier way of life to you? If you can, then that person, maybe without knowing, has become a martyr to you.

John Wesley heard and saw children on board a ship in a life threatening storm calmly pray and sing praises to God, while he recognized his own terrifying fright of dying. They were witnesses or martyrs to him, yet their names are not known to us and John Wesley's name has become legendary.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German scholar and teacher. He taught at Union Theological Seminary in NYC. But, in the 1930's he decided to return to his homeland. He became part of what to become known as the "Confessing Church." He quietly resisted the Nazis as a Lutheran clergy and teacher. The Nazis arrested him and jailed him. During that time he wrote *Letters and Papers From Prison*. One month before the war ended, they hanged him. But his witness lived on.

In the Civil Rights era of the 1960's a young and fearless black pastor in Alabama began his time of witness against the brutality of a system that dehumanized and terrorized a whole culture because of their hue. He, too, was imprisoned and wrote his own, *Letters and Papers From Prison*. He believed in non-violence and studied Ghandi and worked on his doctoral dissertation under the former dean of Wesley Theological Seminary, Dean Harold DeWolf. Dr. DeWolf did not know that his interpretation of the beatitude could so radically impact the

civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. I remember well hearing that sermon in the 70's when he said, "blessed are the meek or those who have the strength to be gentle, for they will inherit the earth." His witness was quiet and gentle, but deeply profound and loving. He dedicated his retirement life to working with inmates in prison in Florida.

Today, we need those quiet and courageously meek witnesses, whose names few will know, but whose witness will impact someone somewhere to be what God wants them to be.

I remember a man, who decided to try something different and to go against the grain. He saw that the deaf world was suffering in learning. He saw their limitations and dreams unrealized. So, he devised a simple new alternative and began to share his idea in far away Australia and a boy's school for the deaf. At that school a woman from Boston had come there to learn his new idea. She then came back to the states and began to teach. She met a young couple with a three year old deaf son with no language. This couple was at their wits end seeking in any way possible to make life better for their child. In four nights this energetic and caring woman taught this radically new concept called Cued Speech to this couple and it

forever changed their family. That couple was Sue and me and our son, Paul, who later became the first president of the National Cued Speech Association.

We never know how or when or to what degree we will be a witness for good in Christ's name. But the truth is that we can, if we will allow God to work in and through us.

The man who had this vision in the first place was a genius and he was a very gentle and caring person of faith. All his children earned Phd.'s. He traveled the world helping the deaf and their families find new hope. But, he never got recognition and he never sought it. I had the privilege of knowing and working with this man, Dr. Orin Cornett, former vice president of Gallaudet College, Washington, D.C.

Today, the world has many injustices and hurts to human beings, to our world ecology, and to our international relations. Sometimes, it only takes one person to tip the scales and make the witness that makes the change that God needs. There was a book called *The Hundreth Monkey* that describes how just one more witness will be all that needs to change things. Are you that martyr for the sake of Christ? You can be. Amen.