

We have been reading through the New Testament book of Acts over the past few weeks. Acts tells the stories of the church as it was just starting out. In the first few chapters we read about the reorganization of the 12 apostles, we read about the Holy Spirit coming down to guide the newly forming church, we read about the beginning ministry of Peter and John.

Two weeks ago we read the story of Ananias and Sapphira and how they had to make a full financial commitment to follow Jesus. Then last week we read about how people in this new Christian community were complaining that the widows and the poor were not being properly cared for.

To care for the needs of the poor and the widows, the 12 apostles appoint 7 men to take over this responsibility. One of these 7 is Stephen. Stephen's responsibility, as it is described in the Scriptures, is to wait on tables.

Anyone who has worked as a waiter or waitress knows that this is not an easy job. Customers disrespect you. You get lousy tips from the most obnoxious customers. You have awful work hours. Bosses treat you poorly. I have never been a waiter but I have been a short order cook at one point in my life.

So my experience working at Spudwich does give me some sense of what it is like to be in the service industry. Of course, I was about to be fired from Spudwich for incompetence when I resigned to take the position as pastor of Siler City Presbyterian Church.

In the story from Acts 7 that we are about to read, Stephen responds to the invitation to wait on tables. Doesn't sound like a very important responsibility and certainly not a controversial responsibility. But Stephen's role as a waiter serving the poor and widows will take a violent and deadly turn.

Stephen is asked to care for the poor and the widows and he does that. But then Acts tells us that Stephen is full of grace and power and does great wonders and signs among the people. But it seems that some folks in religious power do not like what Stephen has to say and what he is doing. They start to argue with Stephen.

Stephen seems to win the arguments so then these religious leaders start to spread rumors and lies about Stephen among the ordinary folks. Stephen is brought in front of the religious council where false witnesses give testimony against him. Remember, this Stephen is simply a person who was called to be a waiter helping the poor and the widows.

After the false testimony by others, Stephen is allowed to speak. In front of these very powerful religious leaders as well as everyday kinds of people, Stephen talks about how God has been faithful to their ancestors. Stephen talks about God being faithful to Abraham and to Joseph. Stephen reminds his listeners about how God was faithful to Moses in leading the people.

But then Stephen calls out his listeners because he calls them stiff-necked people. Stephen tells them that their ancestors were the ones who were unfaithful to God. Stephen tells them that they are still being unfaithful.

Read Acts 7:54-8:1

Not surprising, the text tells us that the crowd becomes enraged at what Stephen says. A mob forms. Stephen is described as someone who is filled with the Holy Spirit but the crowd doesn't see that. All that they see is someone who is challenging their understanding of God and of themselves. All that they see is someone seeking to undermine them.

So this gathering of everyday types of people turns into a lynching mob. They drag Stephen out of the city and they begin to stone him.

Why do they stone him? If you remember the earlier text that Lara read we heard that the punishment for doing something that the people determine is evil was death by stoning. This mob begins to put themselves in the role of being God's enforcer. They see Stephen and his words as evil and they pick up the heaviest rocks and bash him over and over again until Stephen is dead.

This Christianity thing is not always so easy. Truly following the ways of Christ can be deadly.

A couple of weeks ago some of us joined with folks from the Liberty Hill AMEZ Church and went to see the movie "Selma." Selma is the story of Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in trying to get Southern States to allow people of color the opportunity to vote. It was legal to vote but hurdles were being put up that prevented people of color from voting in elections in the South. So Dr. King and others began to organize non-violent protests to shame the nation into allowing all people the opportunity to vote without hindrance.

There were many observations to take away from the movie but one aspect of the movie that jumped out to me as a person of faith was the central role that Christianity and the church played in the civil rights movement. The movie begins with 4 little girls walking down the stairs in their church when a terrorist's bomb detonates killing each of these girls. This bomb was not set by Islamic terrorists but good ole Southern Christians like us.

The church continued to play a pivotal role in the movie as organizational meetings for the civil rights movement were held in churches. Religious language and Scripture is shared throughout the movie. As I watched this movie I found myself thinking about the witness of Stephen and how if we are really faithful to the gospel this can stir up lots of evil and lots of violence.

But I also found myself asking the question, “Do we in the church still do this?” Do we in the church still risk losing our own lives for the sake of living out the gospel? Do we risk losing our lives for standing up for what is faithful or are we too focused on providing entertaining worship services and protecting church real estate?

I find it interesting as well that in the same week that I am faced with preaching this text we here in York County have been in the national news. We have been in the national news because the convictions of 9 former students of Friendship College in Rock Hill were overturned.

These former students attending a Christian college, known as the Friendship 9, had the audacity to believe that God created them as equal as God created the white people that sat at the lunch counter in the Woolworths in Rock Hill. And so they stood up to the power of the time and were willing to be arrested and serve 30 days of hard labor and beatings for a principle that they believed was important. The principal that God creates all people equally.

In the Herald on Thursday, the editorial board was reflecting on the Friendship 9 and said this. “For whatever reason, too many good people failed to act in a timely manner which is more the rule than the exception throughout history.”

After Stephen is killed in Acts, an interesting change happens in the story of the church. After this stoning, the story moves away from Jerusalem and moves out into new and unexplored regions. The good news of Jesus Christ begins to spread to places that are hungry to hear what people in Jerusalem were too fearful to accept any more.

Before his death, Stephen kneels down and prays to God. What does he pray? Does he pray to God to kill those who stoned him? Quite the contrary. Stephen prays to God to forgive them for what they have done. Stephen then dies and is considered the first Christian martyr.

We are reading Acts to catch a glimpse of the kind of church that God is calling us to be. It's easy to be misled into thinking that church is about entertaining people so that they will show up and give money and it is easy to assume that faithful Christianity is about protecting the real estate and buildings that we think we own.

But I encourage us to resist the temptation to buy into these prosperity gospels. I invite us to keep the story of Stephen in our focus as we seek to be faithful to what God is leading us to become. Faithfulness to God does not mean success like our culture defines success.

Sometimes faithfulness to God may mean that you take stands that are not popular. Sometimes faithfulness to God may mean risking what you think is important.

Faithfulness to God may also mean, like Stephen, we forgive those who cause pain to us. Do you as a Christian and do we as a church have the faithfulness and the willingness to die for what is faithful and right?

Stephen stood up for what was faithful and even though he was killed the church prospered. AMEN.

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