

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2017
Mother's Day

Christianity's First Martyr
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
May 14, 2017

Acts 7:44-60

Our scripture reading this morning is one which few pastors use as the text for a sermon. The Lectionary suggests Acts 7:55-60 as today's text but I opted to start earlier at verse 44 in order to put the story of Stephen in better context. Even then, I probably didn't go as far back in Acts as I should have. The full story begins with Acts 6:8 but I simply do not have the time in a worship service for such a long reading. I therefore urge you to read the complete story at home later today.

Who exactly was Stephen? We know that he was the first Christian martyr, but there really is little in the New Testament about him except for his story in Acts 6 and 7 and two other very brief mentions in Acts 11 and Acts 22.

Stephen was one of seven Greek-speaking disciples of Jesus who had been chosen to work with the apostles to help with distribution of food to widows. Stephen and the other six Greek-speaking disciples are commonly referred to as deacons because it was their job to serve at tables where gifts were distributed. They were the first Christian diaconate.

Acts 6:8 says that Stephen was "*a man full of God's grace and power*" and "*...performed great wonders and signs among the people.*" He was doing God's work but what he was doing did not sit well with the Jews --- not at all.

They argued with him and accused him of blasphemy against Moses and against God. They produced false witnesses who said, "*This fellow never stops speaking against ... the law for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place [meaning the Temple in Jerusalem] and change the customs Moses handed down to us.*"

Stephen gives a long speech, Acts 7:1-53, in his defense before the Sanhedrin but it was to no avail. He was sentenced to death by stoning.

While he was being stoned Stephen prayed aloud, "*Lord do not hold this sin against them.*"

He forgave his tormentors, one of whom was Saul, later known as Paul, and in

Acts 8:1 we read, *“And Saul approved of their killing him.”*

Steven was a man of God and he was killed because of his love for Jesus and because he expressed that love publicly.

Would you go out and proclaim the Gospel knowing that by doing so you might be killed for your beliefs? Few of us would, I am sure. If being a Christian was a death sentence, what would have happened to Christianity? Would it have died out? Would faith in Jesus have ended really before the church actually got started?

The answer is **No!** In fact all but one of the apostles and a huge number of the early followers of Christ did die because of their faith. They persisted in spreading the Gospel and for the most part were killed. Peter was crucified as were Andrew, Philip, Thaddaeus and Simon the Zealot. James the son of Zebedee was killed with a sword. Bartholomew, according to some writings was crucified. Other writings say that he was skinned alive and then was beheaded. Thomas was run through with a spear and Matthew was stabbed in the back with a sword. James the Less was beaten, stoned and killed by being hit on the head with a club. The only one to die of natural causes apparently was John.

Yes, it was dangerous to be a Christian back then, and it still is in some parts of the world. The apostles were told by Jesus that they probably would die for their faith, yet they still went out to spread the Gospel.

As a pastor in this country I don't worry about being persecuted for my faith but if I were preaching in a number of other countries I literally would be risking my life for Jesus. My only real risk today is probably the traffic on I-40 as I commute to and from church each Sunday.

Our Daily Bread (December 17, 2012) said *“Stephen ... took a serious risk, but it was for proclaiming the good news about Jesus ... he was falsely accused of blasphemy against God and the Mosaic Law, and [was] brought before the high priest. In response to a question from the high priest, Stephen took a risk and preached a sermon he knew his hearers would not like. He said that throughout history, the nation had repeatedly rejected God's messengers. And now they had rejected the Messiah.*

“... Why would Stephen risk his life to preach about Jesus? He desperately wanted his hearers to know that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, they no longer needed to live under the law but could live under grace and forgiveness.”

For saying that, he was killed.

Stephen was not one of the apostles; he was a convert to Christianity. Barbara Brown Taylor ⁽¹⁾ referred to Acts 6 as telling about Stephen's "*shooting star ministry*." A shooting star is a meteor which suddenly flashes through the atmosphere giving off a bright light and then is extinguished. This is a good analogy to Stephen's ministry. He came as one of the church's first seven deacons, he gave a powerful sermon, and then his ministry was extinguished. Barbara Brown Taylor said, "*... he was not anyone's idea of headline material. He was simply a good, faithful man who could be trusted to distribute food to those who were hungry without putting more on one person's plate than another.*"

"... In those days, deacons were meant to be seen and not heard ... [but once Stephen] had hands laid on his head, all the grace and power poured into him spilled over as signs and wonders.

"When you put him and Jesus together, it is pretty hard to deny that this is what Christian success looks like: not converting other people to our way of thinking; not having the oldest, prettiest church in town; not even going out of our way to be kind and generous, but telling the truth so clearly that some people want to kill us for it."

Amen.

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Home By Another Way", Crowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011