

Year A, Easter 5  
Acts 7:55-60  
Psalm 31:1-5,15-16  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
John 14:1-14

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To fully appreciate the martyrdom of Stephen that we hear about in today's lesson from Acts, we must read the whole story of Stephen, beginning with Chapter 6. Luke tells us there was a dispute between the Hellenists, who were the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, and the Hebrews, Jewish Christians who spoke Aramaic. When the Hellenists complained that the Hebrews were neglecting the Hellenist widows in the distribution of food, the apostles called the entire community together to resolve an issue which plagues the church even today: specifically, that there was more work to be done in Christ's name than the apostles could do alone. In order to accomplish all Jesus had asked them to do for him, the leaders of the early church needed help from the other members of that young community, just as the leaders of St. Francis need help from the members of our parish to accomplish all we are called to do in and through Christ.

To resolve the problem in the early church, the apostles asked the community to choose "seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom," to be appointed to the task of feeding the hungry, and caring for the widows and orphans. This division of labor would free the apostles to focus on prayer, preaching, and teaching God's Word. Stephen was the first-named of these seven men, who were then commissioned for their work when the apostles laid hands on them. They became the first to do what the Church traditionally identifies as the work and ministry of deacons.

But it's not his diaconal work that brings Stephen to our attention. The other six who joined him in the work of feeding the hungry are never again mentioned by name, and if it hadn't been for what happened to him, Stephen probably wouldn't have been mentioned, either. Nonetheless, their work remains a model for service to Christ even today, as those who are called to serve as deacons become a bridge between the church and the world, bringing the world's needs to the church's attention and leading the church to respond as Christ would have responded to the least of them. Who knows what might have happened if Steven had lived to continue his service to the Gospel; but it was not to be.

In Chapter 6, verse 8 of Acts, Luke writes that "Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people," and a few verses later we learn that when he spoke of Christ, some members of the synagogue argued with him about what he said. "...they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke," so they began to speak against him, accusing him of heresy, inciting others to confront him, and then brought him before the Sanhedrin, the court of ancient Judaism. In the last verse of Chapter 6, Luke tells us that "all who sat in the council looked intently at [Stephen], and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." And then the trial began, with the high priest asking Stephen if the accusations against him were true.

Through fifty-four verses of Chapter 7, Stephen answers that question with a lecture that summarizes biblical history. Rather than telling them about the Good News of Jesus Christ, he tells them things about their heritage and their faith which they no doubt already knew; and he does it in a way that insults and angers them. Listen to what he said, beginning with Chapter 7, verse 51:

"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.”

We should not be surprised that they were infuriated by what Stephen said, or that in their anger they dragged him out of town and stoned him to death. Nor should we be surprised that before they attacked him he saw the “glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,” or that just before he died he asked forgiveness for them, because it’s clear through what Luke has written about him that Stephen was an imitator of Christ in both his life and in his death. Stephen was the first—but unfortunately not the last—Christian martyr. The word martyr comes from the Greek for “witness,” one who witnesses to beliefs by dying for them. Sadly, Stephen’s death marked the beginning of a time of great persecution of Christians, often through the actions of Saul, to whom we’re first introduced in this story. While Stephen was being stoned, the witnesses to the event laid their coats at his feet, and Luke tells us in Chapter 8, verse 1 that Saul approved of their killing Stephen. Could it be that after his conversion to belief in Christ, this one-time persecutor of Christians remembered Stephen when he called the Ephesians to be imitators of Christ?

We hear about Stephen and his martyrdom only twice in the three-year lectionary cycle, on the fifth Sunday of Easter in Year A—today—and on his Feast Day, which is unfortunately observed on December 26, a time when our attention is elsewhere. Nonetheless, it’s likely you already knew the story I’ve just told you; and surely the powerful witness of this servant of Christ bears telling again and again. Placed as it is today to accompany the lessons from the First Letter of Peter and the Gospel of John, it gives us a rather unsettling example of the cost of discipleship when we believe deeply and completely the Christ, who is our way, truth, and life. Jesus says that the one who believes in him will also do the works that he does. Certainly that is how Stephen lived, and how Saul—who-became-Paul also lived after he met the risen Christ—and how they and many others, known and unknown, died—knowing that they were doing the work of the one who defined their purpose in both life and death.

This week I’ve been thinking a lot about the four young people we’re honoring today as they transition into the next phases of their lives. Soon they’ll be leaving their families, and leaving our church family, too, although I certainly hope that we’ll see all of them from time to time. At the risk of sounding like a sappy, over-emotional parent, I’ve been wondering how I could tie this story of Stephen into something profound for them to remember. One word has kept coming to my mind: zealot. We don’t hear it much anymore, and we may think of it as negative, or extreme, but *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines a zealot as “one who is enthusiastic and determined for a cause,” which isn’t negative at all.

So here’s what I want to say to these graduating seniors, and to all of you, as well: If there is anything worthwhile for us to learn from the story of Stephen, let it be that when we believe in something, truly believe in it, we should be ready to stand up and speak out for it. Now listen, I’m *not* suggesting that any of you go out and get yourselves stoned to death. But I am suggesting that a life truly worth living comes from faith and belief in something or someone that is greater than ourselves, something that brings us joy and energy and passion. For Christians, the obvious something or someone is God in Christ. My prayer for all of you, young and old alike, is that your faith in Christ will always be the motivating factor of your life, just as it was for Stephen. Like Stephen, may we *steadfastly* follow the way, the truth, and the life who leads us to know the Kingdom of God in this world, and to life everlasting in the world to come.

Amen and amen.