

The Lessons Ap- pointed for Use on the

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Year A

RCL

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



The Collect

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eter-

nal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our
Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the
unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever
and ever. *Amen*

Acts 7:55-60

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 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. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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 14:1-14

Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 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’? 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. 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.

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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

SERMON

Stephen is recognized as the church's first martyr. He was stoned to death by people committed to the worship of God. How in the world did such an obscenity come about? We need to look closer.

Stephen is first mentioned in the previous chapter of Acts in connection with a dispute between Greek speaking believers in Christ and Jewish believers in Christ, the *Hellenists* and the *Hebrews*.

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the

daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

This SHOULD make you uncomfortable. If the church is the body of Christ, it is being dis-

membered over some seriously selfish issues! Hungry is hungry. Need is need, but you can easily imagine the Hebrews reasoning that as they came from God's own people, their hungry widows should be treated more carefully than these, these, Hellenists. And you can easily imagine the pain this caused to God Himself to see His church divided on so selfish a basis.

Of course, divisions, once begun, multiply. The matter was taken to the twelve, the original disciples of Jesus (plus Matthias who had replaced Judas). They thought they had more important work to do than to wait on tables, so

they delegated attendance to the suffering of widows to seven men, including Stephen. This is where the theology hit the fan. What is more important than to attend to the suffering of your brothers and sisters? How did they get so sidetracked?

I have one theory. When we say, “My God”, it is frighteningly easy to understand “The God whom I possess” rather than “The God who possesses me”. Of course, we would never say such a thing out loud, but there is more going on between our ears than comes out our mouths. That sort of thinking might be behind the Twelve’s words that their time would be

better spent in praying and “serving the word” than in rolling up their sleeves and addressing the suffering before them.

The scene is set for the first martyrdom of the church. The Greek-speaking Hellenists are crying out from the need of their poor for help.

The Hebrews are not responding initially. The Twelve recognize the justice of the appeal, but imagine that they have more important work, and so delegate the responsibility down the chain to Stephen and the others. It is a shame and an affront to the Gospel, but Stephen and the others accepted the burden with grace.

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great

wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen.

The division has shifted! We're no longer speaking of division of labor among the followers of Christ. Now we have conflict between the followers of Christ and the Jewish community. This is the point where the story of Stephen begins to appeal to those who prefer to understand the coming of Jesus as God's rejection of His own people. Antisemitism is another of those "My God" heresies which can only be maintained by completely ignoring

John's account for today:

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." 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'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father"!

God, the inconceivable, has taken on human form and walked among us, even to suffering death at our hands, to bring to us the good news that the suffering of our brothers and sisters is entrusted to each of us to attend to. God does not belong to any race or people. Rather,

each of us belongs to God and we are entrusted with His purposes. That thought sours the minds of too many people today. It did then, too.

They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.

I want to focus on the points of his speech that so enraged the Sanhedrin.

In recounting the history of the patriarchs,

Stephen noted that God appeared first to Abraham in Mesopotamia, thus establishing that God does not dwell only in one particular building (meaning the Temple). I'm sure that horrified the Sanhedrin. Was not the Temple the very house of God?

His second point went down equally poorly. In recounting the history of Moses, he noted that after God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and Moses had successfully lead the people out of Egypt, the Israelites stubbornly turned to other gods. This establishes the second main theme of Stephen's speech, Israel's disobedience to God.

Finally, Stephen denounced his listeners as “stiff-necked” people.

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.

That is not a defense. It is an accusation. It is not intended to save Stephen’s life, but to offer correction toward a new life to those who would hear. We don’t like change, and we particularly don’t like change imposed upon us. It

strips from us the myth of our own power. Look at today's craziness over wearing a face mask! In Michigan, a security guard was shot and killed for daring to insist that a customer wear a face mask and two McDonald's employees were shot in Oklahoma City. Is it any wonder Stephen was stoned? It's like the old joke about a pastor search committee concluding, "We want a new pastor with new ideas who won't change anything." Jesus' arrival changed EVERYTHING and continues to do so.

I don't know what is wrong with us. We cannot perceive God even when He stands among

us.

Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?”

Worse, we murder those who DO perceive

Him.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him

It all seems so hopeless! Yet, there IS hope.

Even in the midst of our most murderous rages,

there is hope.

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. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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.

What this young man, Saul, witnessed must have had a powerful effect upon him. He became the Apostle Paul.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and
be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and
give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in

square brackets.

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