

Acts 6:1-7:2a, 44-60

Stephen

April 18, 2021

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We concluded our reading of the Gospel of Luke last week and this week we move on to Acts. Acts is the sequel to Luke, written by the same author. If Luke and the other gospels are the good news (that what gospel means) of Jesus Christ, Acts is the good news of the Holy Spirit. It is the author's perspective on the story of the early church and God's activity in the world following Jesus's death. Again, it was written a full generation after Jesus's death to a community that was still experiencing the hardships of Roman oppression and rubbing up against the authority of Jewish leadership. The early Christians and their communities were very much rooted in Judaism which, we will see, creates tension.

My favorite part of the book of Acts is the description of the early church found in chapter 4.

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Doesn't that sound wonderful? "There was not a needy person among them..." Can you imagine? This description of early Christian community has been held up as the ideal for thousands of years. It has been the inspiration for many a new church start, with varying degrees of success. How great it would be to be part of a community like that. That's chapter 4 of Acts. Our text begins in chapter 6 like this:

6 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. ² 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. ³ 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, ⁴ while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” ⁵ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip and 5 others: Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

So, already just 2 chapters after that lovely description of community, there were complaints about equity. That sure didn't last long. According to the text, there were two groups among these early followers; the Hebrews, who spoke Aramaic and the Hellenists, who spoke Greek. All were followers of Jesus, but they were very different culturally. The twelve apostles, who were in charge, were part of the Hebrew group. The complaint was that the Greek speaking widows were not being properly cared for by the community. In other words, there were, in fact, needy people among them. The twelve were so busy preaching, they didn't have time to actually help people, so they, with the approval of the whole community, appointed 7 Hellenist men (we know they were Hellenist because of their names) to make sure the widows and others had what they needed. The twelve apostles would pray and proclaim the word, and the 7 deacons would do their job, taking care of the people. Everyone would stay in their lane and all would be well.

But how does the Yiddish proverb go? “Men plan and God laughs.”

The story continues:

⁸ Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² 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. ¹³ They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never stops saying things against this

holy place and the law; ¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him, “Are these things so?” ² And Stephen replied:
“Brothers and fathers, listen to me.

And Stephen went on to preach a very long sermon that eventually led to his death by stoning. This text is the source of a very worn-out joke about Stephen being stoned because his sermon was so very long. While I am sure you can relate, that is not actually why he was stoned...so don't get any ideas. He was stoned because he pointed out to the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council) that throughout their history, every time God tried to change things, the people bucked up against that change. In fact, in his long sermon, he gave example after example of God moving in the world and the people digging in their heels to stay where they were. I think it is worthwhile to note that the plan was for Stephen to be quietly helping the people. Instead, he was, “full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.” So much for everyone staying in their lane. Of course, the spirit of God cares nothing about our lanes. And to be fair, I am deeply suspicious of proclaimers of the word (preachers) who don't think helping people is part of their calling. Additionally, we all know that, when we help people, we are actually proclaiming the word of God, so no wonder God laughs at our plans. We don't really know what we are doing.

The straw that broke the proverbial camel's back as far as the Sanhedrin were concerned was this part of Stephen's sermon, when he talked about the temple. ⁴⁴ “Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says,
⁴⁹ ‘Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,

or what is the place of my rest?

⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?’

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵² 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. ⁵³ You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

The words the author had Stephen preach, though set in a story that took place in the early first century, right after Jesus’s death, were more in response to the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., which happened shortly before the author wrote Luke and Acts. Until then, Judaism was dependent on the temple as the place where human beings could interact with God. We can understand why Luke would want to address the anxiety the people in his community had about the absence of the temple.

The point Stephen was trying to make was that the spirit of God was moving in a new way, a way that was not dependent on a building. In these days of empty churches due to the pandemic, we can relate to the anxiety in Luke’s community. I am grateful that this congregation has been patient and relied on science with regard to reopening the building. It hasn’t been so in other churches. I’ve heard tales of ugliness as church leaders have made decisions about whether to return to in-person worship.

But our temporary closures are quite small compared to Stephen’s message about the temple being completely unnecessary. Sadly, and predictably, the response to Stephen’s message was violence. Change is hard, isn’t it? And sometimes our fear of change brings out the worst in us. It certainly brought out the worst in the people listening to Stephen that day.

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 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.

In the face of an angry crowd, Stephen delivered his own prophetic message that accused the people of rejecting the prophets and opposing the Holy Spirit. This story has proven to be dangerous. It intentionally draws parallels between Jesus’s death and Stephen’s, which has fueled the fires of anti-Semitism. “Those bad Jewish leaders...they killed Jesus and then they killed Stephen.” It is inappropriate to use this story that way. First, the Romans crucified Jesus as an insurrectionist. It was a state-sanctioned execution. The Romans held all the power. Stephen’s death was more like a lynching, like mob violence. The Sanhedrin had some legal power, but what happened to Stephen was not about justice, it was about fear and control.

And to Stephen’s point, almost at every turn, the ways of God have been met first with resistance. Instead of embracing what the Spirit is doing, we allow our fear of change and fear of “the other” to cause us to dig our heels in for a fight, as if God needs us to protect God from “them.” God doesn’t need us to protect God. God needs us to care for each other.

Human history is filled with examples of human beings trying to assuage their fear and hold on to power by using violence and people of faith, sadly, are not immune to these ways. We talk about Stephen as the first Christian martyr and there have been many others. But Christians have used their beliefs as a reason to impose violence on other people as well. We’ve killed Muslims in the crusades, burned women we decided were witches at the stake, bombed abortion clinics, lynched our Black siblings, tortured and killed Indigenous people, while stealing their land, and still today allow medical practitioners to perform conversion therapy on teens in the LGBTQ+ community. All of these things are acts of violence against our neighbors and all of them have been defended by Christians who understand these things to be in keeping with what it means to be followers of Jesus. So no, we don’t get to point our fingers at the Sanhedrin and say, “Look at those bad people...we would never do such a thing.” The truth is, we’ve proven over and over again that we would.

In spite of us and our fear, the Spirit of God continues to work and keeps moving in new directions, doing new things. If we were to keep reading in Acts, we would see that after Stephen's death, many followers of Jesus took off out of Jerusalem because they were afraid they would be next. As a result, the stories of Jesus were shared all over Judea and Samaria, spreading the good news beyond Jewish communities to the Gentiles. Christianity grew in the homes of its followers, around tables where food was shared, prayers were prayed, scripture was read, and stories were told. God's people did interact with God without the temple. God was, indeed, doing a new thing.

Preparing for this sermon has caused me to consider that, historically, people of faith have hurt a lot of people because they didn't believe the right things. But believing the right things has rarely had anything to do with the kin-dom of God Jesus came to reveal and the love he thought was worth dying for. It also has nothing to do with that idyllic Acts 4 community, which was meant to reflect the kin-dom of God and God's desire for shalom for all of creation.

The violence in our nation this week has reminded me of just how far from God's vision for the world we are. Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison, Hebrew Bible professor at Phillips Theological Seminary wrote about that on social media this week. She wrote, "The Holy's shalom seeks the well-being and personal fulfillment of everyone. Shalom embraces justice, reconciliation, and nonviolence. Shalom is the experience of being in right relationship with the Divine, which would mean that you see yourself and your neighbors as God does: inherently good and worthy of respect. Such a state of being would make violence impossible because each person would be valued as an image of the Divine in the world..."

Friends, being a follower of Jesus is about one thing: believing in the inherent worth of all of creation and treating each other accordingly. That's all. There is no theology test. We can argue over whether God resides in tents, temples, empty churches, homes, or everywhere, but in the end, if we don't take care of each other, we haven't acknowledged God's presence in our lives at all. We can argue over doctrine and creed, the trinity, the right way to worship and the right songs to sing, but none of it has anything to do with following the ways of Jesus. We are just supposed to take care of each other.

Those 8 Fed Ex employees in Indianapolis should still be alive today. And the man who killed them shouldn't be dead either. He should be part of a community who is caring for him and helping him heal from the trauma in his own life. George Floyd should be alive, with his family. His death and the actions of his killer should not be the subject of a trial. Adam Toledo should be doing the things 13-year-olds do, instead of being prepared for burial. I could go on and on. Shalom will not be brought about by militarized police, systems built on racism, ignoring the mental health needs of our neighbors, buying more guns, and putting our individual beliefs and preferences above the common good.

Wear your masks. Lock your guns and ammunition in gun safes. Consider how the things you say and do affect your neighbors who have Black and brown skin. I heard someone say this week that the problem in this country is that we are talking about racism, bringing up the past. That's a lie. First of all, there isn't just one problem. But one of the problems is racism and we have to talk about it! Most importantly, we have to do something about it.

We will see glimpses of shalom as we dismantle, piece by piece, the systems that send Black men to prison or to the grave instead of college, trade school, or meaningful employment. We will see glimpses of shalom when we insist on access to healthcare for everyone, when we decide there are some guns civilians don't need access to and gun laws are not the enemy. The enemy is dehumanizing each other, making some lives worth more than others based on skin color, age, culture, sexuality, gender, or belief system.

The story of Stephen reminds us that it isn't just the job of a few to take care of people. We are all called to care for each other, those of us who are paid to preach using words and those of us who preach with our lives. And Stephen's death reminds us of how very prone to violence human beings are, that it is never the answer, and miraculously, even when we do horrific things to each other, the spirit of God is still loose in this world and it is moving, in us and around us. Let's try not to get in its way. Amen.