

Sunday, January 14, 2018
 Stephen, Deacon and Martyr, transferred

Stephen and Martin

2 Chronicles; Psalm 17:1-5, 15; Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60; Matthew 23:34-39

Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church

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Where do I begin?

Always a question that comes to me when I am beginning to put words to paper or commit them to memory for a sermon...where do I begin?

With the clattering of the world around us, the fire trucks speeding past the house, the bell ringing on a weekday in the office...the chattering cold of an arctic blast that has taken the east coast into colder temperatures than Mars...where do I begin?

And then we have the foul racism being spewed towards nations in Africa and Latin America...towards folks of African descent...where do I begin?

Then I read the opening lines from 'The Acts of the Apostles for today's readings:

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.”

I think I begin there...with Stephen.

Because Stephen, like us...like our world and our time...was facing a reality that was far out of step with that for what we believe would be in step with Christ.

Stephen was what is known as a Hellenistic Jew...a Jewish individual that is either culturally Greek or OK with Greek influence in Judaism, and not Hebrew...as it was referred to at the time. Sort of an ethnic divide between the two expressions of the faith.

Stephen was part of a crew of seven individuals raised up to be deacons in the newly forming Christ movement. His duty was to those less fortunate, the hungry and the widows. You see, in his time, and in the Jewish custom, alms were to be presented to widows...and Stephen was elevated to the deaconship in order to work towards equality in that distribution.

It was said preferential treatment was given to widows whose ethnicity was Hebrew over those that were Greek.

Stephen was one of the first individuals of the church to work towards ethnic equality...something Jesus had already showed us in regard to his treatment of the Samaritan woman, the Roman soldier's servant, and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Stephen was the prototype of the equality we demand and seek for all the children of God.

The appointment of Stephen and the six other deacons was also to provide food for the hungry through distribution efforts focusing on the poor and disadvantaged.

Sound familiar?

In 1888, without much historic notes or records to many of our knowledge, the Philadelphia Lutheran Synod sent a pastor to Wilmington Delaware to establish a church named St. Stephen's in honor of the first martyr.

At that time there was only one other Lutheran Church here, Zion, approximately somewhere in the middle of I-95.

What we know is that Zion spoke German and St. Stephen's was to be the English-speaking church.

Beyond that, all we really know is that the church took the name of the first martyr for the faith.

Like the reason for naming our church St. Stephen, little is known about Stephen...except that he went about Jerusalem preaching, teaching, distributing food to the outcast and lonely, raising up the widows and caring for those that society would not give a second look. He was living into the faith and grace of Jesus Christ.

And we come to the story in Acts when the Synagogue leaders had enough of this guy, brought him up on false charges because he was seen as an agitator from the outside...a disturber of the peace...a person that would not settle for the status quo. Even in his obedience to God over the law of humankind...Stephen was condemned to death.

Most places that bear the name of Stephen do so in honor of his deaconship and his martyrdom. He is known as the protomartyr of the faith...the first martyr. Murdered by his own people for not just preaching, but also living the faith of Jesus Christ in a bold and public way.

If only we had more people willing to live in such a bold and public way – to live in a way that shows forth the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ himself.

You know what, God has never fallen short of giving us both prophets and faithful people to pave a road for us to travel...God has never fallen short in giving us people to live in such a bold and public way that shows us the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ himself.

God has never failed to give us prophets even in this time...the age when prophets seem to be hidden in the pages of Scripture and beneath the names of Saints and Martyrs.

Powerful words were written on the 16th of April 1963 in a jail cell in Birmingham Alabama by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Prophetic words spoken in the 20th Century about the early Christian communities cry out for the structural and cultural change of the church in the 21st Century:

“Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were a 'colony of heaven' and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be 'astronomically intimidated.' They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest. Things are different now.

The contemporary Church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.” (Martin Luther King Jr. Letter from the Birmingham Jail)

From that jail cell came words from a modern-day prophet calling on the very structure of the church to live into the faith and grace of Jesus Christ – to not be silent in the face of injustice, but rather stand up for those being abused and systematically murdered...to preach and teach even if it meant incarceration or a death similar to that of Stephen on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

In his lengthy letter...much like the lengthy speech of Stephen, Dr. King continued to layout a vision of what the church is possible of.

“The early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”

And in this current society where we can call nations of Africa and the Caribbean vulgarities or allow the systemic systems of racism and hunger to become so perverse in our society that we become numb to the suffering of God's children...we need an institution to transform not just society but the souls and spirits of those that sit in the pew praising God only on Sunday mornings.

Dr. King noticed that Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America...he noted this in the 60's and the truth of his statement is just as soul crushing true today as it was in his time.

We are a church that bears the name of a person that sought to unite and equify the ethnicities of his time...and we must be the church of this time that steps out of the shadows and pursuit policies and ministries that will break this edifice of segregation.

We may not be able to change Sundays, but we sure can change our weekday approach to life...we can immerse ourselves in a ministry like Stephen that will bring us into what King saw as the beloved community...but not first without, as King notes, "a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

We are facing a New Year...a new era...a new world...but it is not a place where we are powerless or hopeless or faithless.

We have the ability as the church to so much.

If the time of Stephen saw a small group that was able to change the culture of systemic violence and structures that lent themselves to unholy acts...the church that bears his name can do the same here in our little city 130 years after we chose to name ourselves...and effectively declared our allegiance to a faith of bold action that will not be intimidated or silenced.

We will not be arch supporters of a status quo that ignores the systemic causes of hunger in Wilmington and New Castle County. Not in 2018...not ever.

Our presence will be a disturbance to anyone in power or influence that would not address the rising violence and racism in our city or state – rather we will demand that the grace and the true compassion of Jesus Christ be present in the streets just as it is present in the bread and wine we share in Holy Communion.

My voice, your voice...our voice...will not be silent so long as there are people being plagued by hunger and injustice.

One final note...on Friday night, Pastor Melissa and I attended the MLK Shabbat Service at Beth Emeth...a joint interfaith service, I was reminded of a story about King, a coin and a beggar.

King said that "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

This story made me recall a conversation I had with the Call Committee over a year ago. I remember a person lamenting about always handing bags of food to the same people year after year after year.

“What is causing them to be hungry?” “Why have they not been able to stand up on their own?”

Compassion is not handing a bag out from the pantry – but true compassion lies in attacking the edifice of that which produces the need to hand bags of food out by the thousands.

The questions from that individual were not cruel or heartless – they were serious questions. They were serious issues... “why” and “what” causes hunger.

Until we tackle and defeat the “whys” and the “whats” of hunger, we will only be giving a coin to that beggar...but we will never be the disturbers of the peace...the challenges of the status quo...the one voice that could put an end to the reason that causes the hunger of so many people.

So where do I begin?

Where do we begin?

We begin by lifting the veil of silence...by lifting our voices and allowing heaven and earth to hear the harmony of our liberating song of Jesus Christ...and our unrelenting devotion to a God that shows equity and compassion to all people.

We begin with the name we bear...with Stephen.

We begin with Stephen, so we can live like King and bring about the beloved kingdom of Jesus Christ.