

"Matters of Death & Life" (14May17)  
Acts7:55-60; 1Pet2:2-10; John14:1-14

If your faith is going to get you killed, you might like to anticipate it and know why. That's just one question of life's trajectory as followers of Jesus surprise ending in our first reading presents.

In Acts, we heard the very end of a story. Not even catch-as-catch-can to pick up in the middle of things, the lectionary drops it, leaving us with a shocked "what-the-heck-caused-that?!" No sooner had Stephen opened his mouth than the mob was dragging him out to stone him to death. It's violent, and jaw-droppingly, abruptly so. You can't even avert your attention, it hit so suddenly without the rest of the story.

As it happens, Stephen seemed ready for it, even if we weren't. Our snippet gave practically no indication of what led to his tragic fate. From this ending, Stephen is identified as the first Christian martyr, usually meaning the first to be killed for following Jesus. Now, if one can evidently be brutally lynched not only for *being* Jesus but for *following* Jesus, we might want to back up to figure out why to anticipate that.

Last week, I mentioned how—in spite of their best intentions—the food pantry of the early Christian communists wasn't running fairly. Chapter 6 of Acts described ethnic discrepancies that meant certain widows weren't getting their share in the daily distribution. Without explaining too much dynamics, it's as if German-heritage Lutherans like me neglected responsibility to Scandinavians for somehow considering them inferior or secondary. (Nevermind that—both in Acts and our own history—things continued to spread exponentially past those kind of restrictive

confines, since the Holy Spirit always plans beyond the stubborn barriers we erect).

Besides the first problem of dumb injustices of ethnic boundaries, it also turned out that the core group of 11 (or 12) apostles who had been closest to Jesus said they were too busy to worry the food pantry, saying they had to preach sermons so others needed to be found to staff the pantry.

That's where Stephen came in, as the central one along with six others hired or commissioned to be deacons. It's a word literally for "waiter," for one who serves food. (We've continued to use the term for distinctions in church. Last summer at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly it was adopted as the term for official roles other than pastors. Pastors are responsible for Word and Sacrament, while deacons are those officially involved in Word and Service categories of ministry.)

Like that, Stephen is chosen with Philip and five others especially to serve food. But no sooner than they're in the role did Stephen wind up a preacher anyway. This pattern is consistent in the book of Acts and is kind of funny. I mentioned in Bible discussion a couple weeks ago that, even though we know this book as "Acts of the Apostles," it could better be called "Acts of the Holy Spirit," since she's constantly undoing the Acts the Apostles have done! In this case, the apostles said they had to focus on sermons so somebody else should serve food. But Stephen got put on trial and needed to defend himself, and so the guy selected for food service wound up chosen by the Spirit to preach the longest sermon in the whole book of Acts. In the chapter after this, another deacon, Philip, ends up fulfilling Jesus' words about being witnesses to the ends of the earth as *he* preaches to an Ethiopian eunuch. So much for the apostles trying to stake out their turf or for Peter's central place in charge of the church's

hierarchy! We constantly learn that the Holy Spirit isn't too interested in the center, much less who thinks they're in charge, but keeps pushing to edges of new beginnings.\* Stephen's sermon proclaimed that humans all too often reject as unpopular how God has chosen to act. As if to prove his point, they kill the messenger.

For the original question of what got Stephen killed, what prompted the unleashing of this aggression against him, a basic answer is that he was trying to take seriously what faith meant in following the God of Jesus.

Maybe more to the point for us, the model isn't that you should be getting folks so ticked off they want to crush you. Though his words commending his spirit to God and responding to the hatred with a prayer for forgiveness echo the model in Jesus' own crucifixion, Stephen's faith isn't just for the ending. Though we might wonder if we'd be ready to die faithfully, it's also good to practice long before the end. Stephen is a martyr in the fuller biblical sense, not merely for getting killed, but as a witness, that commending your life into God's care is the greatest power, the rejection and being driven out by people cannot rupture that relationship, since nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

This week I happened across an essay from Luther suggesting when frightened or attacked by anything—not just an angry gang—to resist by saying, “No, you'll not have the last word!...If you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine.”\*\*

And yet...if you're not awaiting a moment when a mob will seize you and drag you out of town, if testifying by confronting heresy isn't really the epitome of what seems to matter

about faith, if your main question isn't really even whether God's love is stronger than death, if it's not so much about standing firm in the face of horrible fears for some ultimate ending, then you may instead have questions about getting to the middle of the story.

That pairs with our Gospel reading. In fact, it's almost directly what Thomas asks and another Philip reiterates, a question not so concerned about the final endpoint but about the meantime, the middle of the story. Thomas says it this way: “Jesus, we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way to get there?” It's tough to arrive at your destination if you don't even know which roads to take.

But Jesus doesn't reply with pointers to start those disciples down the right path of living a bit more faithfully. He doesn't say, “Well, why don't you try to be nicer to your family? Maybe you should gossip less? Or isn't it about time you check the list of volunteer opportunities to see where your skills could be helpful?” He doesn't ask what injustices you're confronting and certainly doesn't prompt, “So...how are you doing on your goals?”

In a way, we like those sorts of mileposts to measure progress, though. We might not feel so saintly as Stephen, but certainly must be doing better than the murderous mob. We perversely even like those directional indicators for when things aren't going the direction we'd want, even when the blame lands back on ourselves for straying from the straight and narrow, or failing to make the improvements we'd intended.

Instead of giving directions, though, Jesus says he's the way. Now, that's not as Jesus himself means directions or instructions or measurements. Neither is it that he is a means to your end, as if he's the rocketship you climb aboard for a ride to heaven. No, Jesus is saying:

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\* See Justo Gonzalez, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* on these observations  
\*\* *Luther's Works*, vol43, p128

don't try to get elsewhere because he's already with you.

That's still not satisfactory for the disciples, though. This other Philip asks for something else: "Show us God and we'll be satisfied." Jesus says, that's what I've been showing you this whole time, throughout the story. Don't go looking for something different, waiting for more spiritual sensations, wandering off after shiny new and improved-ness, expecting you'll get it all figured out, all mapped out. I bring God's presence for you, Jesus says. And just after this, he says when I'm not here, you'll have my Spirit. God always with you! That's what you need! That's it.

Yet that brings us even further back. If we aren't confronting the ultimate end like Stephen, of needing to declare faithfully that our lives are in Jesus' hands, and if like Thomas and Philip we've received the assurance that Jesus is with us even though we're not sure where we're headed or how to place our next steps, then that brings us all the way back to the first verse from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation, tasting that the Lord is good." Like newborn infants, you are nursed and nurtured and raised by this mothering God's goodness. Commending your life into God's care or committing to God's pathways isn't something you need to do because you are carried already and always in God's arms, sustained by God offering herself for you, from giving you birth, through life, beyond death, to new beginnings.

That's tenderly wonderful good news, but it also comes with an ongoing awareness: you may wish it were so quick and simple as going down defiantly in a blaze of glory, with a heavenly vision as you're confidently facing foul villains. But faith isn't about Stephen's ending. Even he witnessed that the Holy Spirit continued to

abide with him. His life was already and always in Jesus' hands. Neither, then, is this about changing your path, about needing to reorient your life. I find the term "followers of Jesus" generally helpful for us these days, but that isn't trying to indicate that you're following Jesus off elsewhere. He is with you.

Yet for this elusive assurance to be most effective, you probably need constant doses of it. If you're longing for the pure, spiritual milk like newborn infants, a newborn nurses like eight or a dozen times per day, right? At best, you're getting communion here and tasting that good gift from God once a week. Not that being away from here removes you from God's maternal, eternal care or excludes you from God's embrace. Far from saying that at all. But if you have to wait a week, you're probably starving, longing, bawling and crying out in desire for another feeding of this pure, spiritual milk to fill you with what you need to live, to satisfy your spirit, and revive your growth.

So, to continue to nurse and nurture you for the days ahead, here's once again the assurance: you are a beloved child of God and nothing can separate you from that. Amen

I believe there are worthwhile reasons Jesus refers to God the Father. But today some of those reasons are offset by Mothers' Day, which gives us good reason to hear this passage with its very Father-heavy language instead in a motherly way:

The holy gospel according to John.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said,] "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Mother'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? <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going." <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" <sup>6</sup>Jesus

said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Mother except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Mother also. From now on you do know her and have seen her."

<sup>8</sup>Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Mother, and we will be satisfied." <sup>9</sup>Jesus said, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Mother. How can you say, 'Show us the Mother'? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Mother and the Mother is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Mother who dwells in me does her works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Mother and the Mother is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>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 Mother. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Mother may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God within us, for the Word of God among us, **thanks be to God.**

Made alive in Christ and filled with his Spirit, let us pray for the church, the world, and all of God's creation.

*A brief silence.*

God our salvation: you have made us your living stones in the waters of baptism. We pray for the church and its leaders; for pastors and deacons, for all the faithful who serve and proclaim your message in surprising ways, in necessary circumstances. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

God our home: your Spirit dwells continually with creation. We pray for the earth; for clean water and air; for the lands all creatures inhabit, and—on this Mothers' Day—for the sustenance of life in generations of all creatures who are your children. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

God our way: you call us to paths of justice. We pray for nations and leaders; for courts and legislatures; for strife-torn communities; for our enemies. We pray for those who are homeless and those with inadequate housing, and ask for your guidance in sanctuary conversations at Leadership Team tomorrow on behalf of a fearful immigrant community. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

God our refuge: you deliver us in times of trouble. We pray

for the rejected and persecuted; for neglected infants and children; for the sick (*especially Mary Rowe, Aletta Boakai, Robin Alexander and Kathy, (Judy Runk), Katie Williams, Roger and Kristi Williams*); for all in need. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

God our shelter: you draw all people to yourself.; for all who come to this building seeking a safe haven. For the assurance of your love in baptism, especially for Zoe Meyer baptized this morning in CoH worship.

Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

God our mother, you give us life and nourish us continually with the spiritual milk of your love. We pray for mothers – biological, adoptive, foster, surrogate, and in broad roles of caregiving – in the daily joys and challenges of parenting, passing on the faith, protecting and guiding their children throughout life, and for those who encounter Mother's Day with frustration or sadness. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

God our life: you prepare a place for us. We give thanks for the witness of your saints. We pray for Peter Wehrle and all who grieve the death of his sister Jackie. Lead us also in Christ to new life. Lord, in your mercy,

**hear our prayer.**

Receive our prayers, merciful God, and dwell in us richly, through Jesus Christ, our life and our redeemer.