

Faith Mennonite Church
April 30, 2017
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The Story Continues
Acts 6:1-15, 7:1-2a 51-60

The Luther Seminary team that created the Narrative Lectionary, which we have been following this year, put us in warp drive this week and sped us past Pentecost, which we will celebrate in early June. Today's narrative about Stephen, has a Pentecostal flavor, for he is described as one "full of the Spirit and wisdom." Not unlike the flurry of the first 100 days of a new president in this country, there is a lot going on in chapters six and seven of Acts. Reading from these chapters just three weeks after we read Luke's passion narrative, we notice how Luke is repeating some themes. Stephen's death mirrors the death of Jesus in several ways. But that's at the end of today's story.

The reading begins with a conflict within this new Christian community. Immediately we see that the Jewish community, in which the church was birthed, was already multicultural. Because Jewish people lived throughout the Roman Empire, those who had lived outside of Israel/Palestine had been shaped by Hellenistic culture. These were not necessarily proselytes, Gentiles who had become Jews—that will be a later part of the story—but simply Jews who had taken on some of the trappings of Greek culture. And when they returned to Palestine, they worshipped in the synagogue but they had an otherness about them.

Those cultural differences seem to be the backdrop for the conflict that emerged. Hellenistic Jews complained that their widows were not receiving the same attention as the Hebrew widows when food was distributed. (You'll recall that earlier in Acts, Luke records the early church's commitment to sharing things in common so that none would lack.) But the church was growing, and growth always brings administrative challenges. It is interesting to see how the apostles faced this challenge.

Notably, they did not minimize the complaint or try to sweep it under the rug. Neither did *they* try to fix it on their own. As Paul would later write in his letters to various churches, there are a variety of gifts and a variety of roles in the church. The apostles believed strongly that they were called to the service of Word (preaching) and prayer. They designated others to the service of administration and distribution. It appears that they recognized the magnitude of the problem because they chose seven persons for this task. We note that the qualities they looked for were not simply administrative skills. They sought persons known to be upright, Spirit-filled and wise. Stephen, the first of the seven who is named, is additionally described as one who was full of faith. This suggests that, within the early church, there was not a belief that some activities required "holier" people than others. Rather, all Christians were expected to take on a life of discipleship and grow into the likeness of Christ, being shaped by the Spirit and learning the way of wisdom. The names of the other six men, which we did not read this morning—Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus, sound as if some, at least, might have been part of the Hellenistic community. That seems like a very wise choice, to call on people from the community that is feeling underrepresented and underserved, to actually take part in shaping the solution.

This section of the reading concludes with verse seven, which says that the word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and priests also began to join the movement. When conflict is handled early and in a healthy, forthright manner, which shares responsibility and empowers additional people, new things can happen. Just as Jesus promised!

But growth, especially growth of a grassroots movement that is inspired by a controversial leader, who was killed, will likely find resistance. And here we find Luke drawing parallels between the resistance that Jesus had earlier faced, and that his followers now begin to face. The next portion of the

story describes Stephen as doing “great wonders and signs among the people.” This sounds like a bit more than simply getting the breadline to move a bit faster. Was he healing? Was he casting out spirits in the way that Jesus had? Some leaders of a synagogue begin to challenge and argue with him. There was probably some jealousy going on. Perhaps they knew he had been appointed for a particular task and expected that he couldn’t hold up to verbal scrutiny. But his wisdom and Spirit-led speech prevailed! So the ante rises. What happens when you start an argument and lose? You try to find another way to win. They tried slander and accused him of things reminiscent of charges brought against Jesus: speaking against the law of Moses and against the temple. They took him before the Sanhedrin, the same leadership council that had questioned Jesus and turned him over to the Romans.

They members of the Council were likely not prepared for the sermon that Stephen preached. It’s long enough that it isn’t usually included in liturgical readings. (But you can all go home and read it!) Stephen responds to the charges by recounting the history of how God made Godself known to the people of Israel and how God remained faithful even when the people were not faithful. He begins with Abraham, moves to Moses and on to King David and David’s son Solomon, who built the first temple. Stephen recounts a God and a people on the move. God is not constrained to a particular place, and, as Solomon said at the dedication of the temple that he had built, “the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.”

Stephen did not begin his sermon talking about Jesus. But he concluded by saying that just as their ancestors had rebelled against God and Moses at Mt. Sinai, in the desert, they had done the same thing to the “Righteous One,” to Jesus. Stephen turned the table on his accusers, calling them “stiff-necked people” and saying that it was they who were guilty of doing the very things they charged him of doing. This brought a violent response from his audience and in short order they dragged him out and stoned him. All the while he remained calm, assured by a vision he had of the heavens opening, and seeing the “Son of Man” seated with God. Echoing the words of Jesus at his death, Stephen offers his spirit to Jesus and he prays that the sins of those who are killing him will not be held against them.

The following chapter describes the beginning of a wave of persecution, which scatters the disciples, and eventually leads to even greater multicultural diversity in the church...and to additional conflict as the leaders in Jerusalem struggle to accept the inclusion of Gentile Christians. But that’s another story for another day.

Today we’re left with two stories: the first of a conflict that has a good outcome; the second of a conflict that devolves into mob violence and ends in another death, not so different from Jesus’ death. The church honors Stephen as the first martyr. While we admire his ability to speak the truth and to accept the consequence, we also see, in this story, the continuation of the struggle within Judaism as the Christian movement grew and flourished. Sadly, stories and memories such as this, caused Christians, in generations that would follow, to develop and hold deeply anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic feelings and positions. Large portions of Christianity did not practice Stephen’s and Jesus’ prayer that the wrongs done to them not be held against them. Many Christians acted in very unforgiving, un-Christ-like ways toward a people with whom they shared a spiritual ancestry. For many centuries, Jewish people were more highly regarded by their Muslim neighbors than by Christians. Unfortunately, that too changed, when Israel became a state in the last century, displacing Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

While we must acknowledge this past, we can also take heart in the growing commitment to peace within many parts of the Christian church today, in many parts of the world. We can pray and work for greater understanding among people of different faiths. We can pray for people who are persecuted for their faith, whether they are Coptic Christians in Egypt or Yazidis in northern Iraq or Hindus in Pakistan or glbtq persons in many countries, including parts of our own. Jesus said that we must be willing to give up our lives in order to find life, but we pray in hope of the day when no one will demand the life of another, when we will accept every person as a child of God and recognize every place as holy ground.