

Having a Faith Others Want

Acts 7:55-60

Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Today's Scripture reports the violent death of St. Stephen, making him the first martyr for Christ. Stephen was called by the church to serve as a deacon. A deacon's primary responsibility back then, as now was ministering to people, especially the poor and widows.

Concentrating on these responsibilities alone, Stephen would have never drawn the attention of the temple rulers. But Stephen stepped out from his comfort zone and became a street preacher who also performed many signs and wonders. Inevitably, he found himself targeted by the religious establishment. As they did with Jesus, the Pharisees and Sadducees tried besting Stephen in debates but the Holy Spirit gave Stephen the words and courage enabling him to stand his ground.

Frustrated, his opponents accused Stephen of heresy and hauled him before the temple court on trumped up charges. Not at all intimidated, Stephen gave his witness until he sensed no one in the room was taking him seriously. He finished with this:

“You stiff-necked people! You are just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him!”

The members of the Sanhedrin became even more infuriated when, “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit looked up to the heavens and saw...Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’” (Acts 7: 56)

Hearing this, the members of the Sanhedrin dragged him outside and stoned him to death. Before he died, again like Jesus, Stephen asked God to forgive them.

Tertillian, one of the early church leaders who served in the second century famously declared, “The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.” He said this because instead of stopping the church's growth, the opposite happened. The faith and bravery of the martyrs inspired non-believers from every class in society to convert. This inspired Martin Luther's lyrics in the final stanza of his hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God,

“... the body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.”

History and contemporary events show that in every generation since Christ, including ours, somewhere in the the world, believers die for their faith.

I've told you this story before but today it bears repeating.

Not too many years ago in North Sudan, one of the most violent places on earth, an Anglican bishop was worshipping with his congregation in his cathedral, which was a tin roof held up by 20 poles. Suddenly the service was interrupted by a mob of boy-soldiers in pick up trucks. They were recruited by the Janjaweed, a criminal organization that still terrorizes the countryside.

High on drugs and brandishing their weapons, they grabbed the bishop and dragged him outside. The boy commander, all of 15 years old aimed his AKA- 47 at the bishop's head and calmly announced. "In a few minutes I'm going to kill you but first, would you like a cigarette?" The bishop replied, "no," but he did ask if he could have a moment to pray. He prayed out loud, "I thank you, Lord that I know I will soon be with you in heaven. I thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ. I also pray you will forgive this young man who is about to take my life, that he too may have a place in your kingdom."

After the bishop finished his prayer, the boy dropped his weapon, reached down and raised up the bishop with his two hands, looked him in the eye and said, "I want what you have."

Facing martyrdom, this bishop's faithful witness affected that boy the same way countless martyrs have always inspired countless others who wanted what the martyrs had.

When I was a boy, I didn't always listen to the sermons but one Sunday I perked up and listened the pastor tell a story that grabbed my attention.

In Denmark during World War II, the Nazis were rounding up Jews to be sent to the concentration camps. Knowing there were spies and informers in his sanctuary, a pastor stood tall in his pulpit and declared, "I'd rather die with the Jews than live with the Nazis. And if anyone didn't hear what I just said, I'll gladly repeat it."

I don't know what happened to that pastor but think of the terrible risk he took. And when the congregation's fear subsided, I'm sure there was at least one of them thought, "I want what he has."

Recently I was talking to a young man from Nepal, which is a Hindu country. The church is growing in Nepal, but there's also growing opposition. It's not oppressive like it is in some countries, but it's still there.

About ten years ago this young man gave his life to Christ and became a leader in his small congregation.

Some members of his family let it be known they couldn't support his decision. I'm sure you can imagine how his declaration of faith made his life harder then it would've been otherwise. It got me thinking, if I were ever in his shoes, I would want what he has.

Sadly, not all Christian martyrs were persecuted just for being Christian. Sometimes the Holy Spirit led them to be prophetic voices and take courageous stands against people who called themselves Christians.

On my first day as a student at Princeton seminary, I noticed several plaques on the porch of the Campus Center. One plaque memorialized six Princeton graduates and their wives who were martyred while serving as missionaries in Asia one hundred and fifty years ago. But there were two other plaques commemorating two graduates who gave their lives in this country for taking a stand for a worthy cause.

Elijah Lovejoy, a member of the class of 1834 was murdered by a mob in Illinois for preaching sermons advocating the abolition of slavery. There was another plaque honoring James Reeb. A member of a class of 1953, he was beaten to death while marching with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama in 1965.

Growing up, I remember my family gathering in the living room to watch the television network premier of the 1950's blockbuster, *The Robe*. It told the story of the early Christians' resolved to die for Christ instead of renouncing their faith. I can remember wondering if I could do likewise. Ten years later, that plaque commemorating James Reeb had an even deeper effect on me. It made me wonder if I could ever be brave enough to assert myself in a dangerous situation that would put me at risk.

Perhaps you experienced a similar reaction when you heard about someone taking a brave stand for a righteous cause. Maybe you even thought, "I want what he has."

The stories of the latter-days martyrs keep Stephen's martyrdom real, but these stories also inspire us to ask the hard questions that can lead to making even harder decisions.

Unlike the apostles, Stephen probably never knew Jesus of Nazareth but he certainly knew the Risen Christ. You have to wonder why the apostles choose this young man for leadership in the church.

I'm sure they discerned he was an earnest young man with a kind and gentle spirit, maybe not especially heroic or charismatic, yet utterly in love with Jesus. Most probably, the apostles never imagined Stephen ever doing anything memorable but having a big heart and the desire to serve was exactly what they were looking for in a deacon.

When they later learned of Stephen's courageous stand and then asking God to forgive his murderers, the whole church was inspired to redouble their efforts to spread the gospel.

Does hearing about Christians today in faraway places facing oppression and even murder ever have that affect on you? Shouldn't their sacrifice inspire us to redouble our efforts to spread the gospel by what we say and do for Christ and his kingdom?

They say, "Character is who you are when no one else is looking. A better way to put it, "Character is who you are when you think no one else is looking."

In Catherine Blixen's memoir *Out of Africa*, she tells about a servant trying to decide whether to become a Muslim or Christian. Before he made his decision, he worked several

months in her house before leaving to work in a Muslim's house before deciding which path to follow.

If others know you're a Christian, you can be sure they're watching you closely. How you handle a crisis, the way you treat other people, whether or not you're fair and honest, these are some of the things they look for.

Some people like playing, "gotcha," hoping to find fault with you. Others will closely watch you because they're considering Christ and your witness will make the difference.

The word 'martyr' comes from the Greek word "witness." Living in America, chances are none of us will ever be asked to die for our faith but every day we are being asked to be a witness for Christ. Like it or not, the way you present yourself to others is your witness, showing whether or not the transforming power of Christ is real. If it is real, you can be sure those watching will be thinking, "I want what you have."

That's a scary thought. You never really know what impact, positive or negative, your daily witness has on someone else. All the more reason to keep connected to Christ through prayer, scripture and worship. Keeping these disciplines keeps you in sync with God's will and aware of your place in God's kingdom.

Something to ponder: Besides Jesus' death on Good Friday, the story of Stephen's martyrdom soon after Pentecost is the only one reported in the New Testament. For some mysterious reason, there's no biblical record of any of the apostles martyrdom. Why's that? My guess is Stephen's witness was so powerful the Holy Spirit wanted his death to stand alone as an example.

"The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church." Their witness makes it possible for you and me to have the faith others want.

The question is, "Do we have what they want?"

The answers to that question can only be found if you look deep into yourself until you can sense Christ rising up within you.

Every day we are called to surrender more of our lives to Christ so we become better at living according to the Sermon on the Mount. That's our calling, giving ourselves to so Christ can live in us and through us.

As I said before, it's probable none of us will ever be called upon to die for Christ. Still, every day we are called to die with Christ, making room for him to be raised up in us so others will want what we have.

That will be our greatest contribution to the world, doing our part to enable God's kingdom to come because God's will is being done here on earth as it is heaven.