

Giving Witness

Acts 7:55-60

When we think of the early church, we tend to envision Jesus' disciples carrying on the work he started. It's easy to lose sight of others who joined the movement as it grew. One of those people is Stephen. Not one of the original 12 disciples, we learn in Acts that he is a trusted follower of Jesus. We read in Acts that in the early days of the church, the Christians pooled their resources and shared all things in common. A high priority was to provide for widows and orphans. To this end, they distributed food on a daily basis. This soon led to a problem: Some were getting more than others.

To relieve them of the burden, the apostles called for seven men of good repute to be elected as deacons to take over the food distribution. Stephen was one of them. Luke describes him as, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 6:5).

It would appear that Stephen was especially gifted. He stood out above the others. He was one of those people who seem to have it all together, whose mind and heart are at ease in every situation, who flow through life with grace and dignity, with little effort. You probably have met people like that – their shoes shine, while yours are scuffed; their hair miraculously falls into place while yours looks you just stuck a fork in

your toaster. Whether they were blessed with better genes or more attentive parents, they came out a cut above.

That was Stephen. By the grace of God, he showed superior promise. But this we know: With promise comes a price. His gifts were not for privilege, but service. He was elected to help distribute food, to care for widows and orphans. That also included the poor and needy, the lame, the home bound, the infirmed, the dying.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul lists a variety of spiritual gifts. He says some are given the gift of wisdom; others, the gift of knowledge; some, faith; others, gifts of healing; some are able to perform miracles; others, to prophesy. You get the picture.

The point is whatever your gifts, they come from God, and they're to be used for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:5-10). Underlying that information is a simple equation: The greater the gift, the greater the responsibility to use it faithfully. As Jesus said, "To whom much was entrusted, of him more will be asked." (Luke 12:48)

Sadly, we live in a world that's lost sight of this connection. Today we learn the opposite: To whom much is given, much is to be enjoyed. The one with the most toys wins. It's all about me.

That may be how the world sees it, but it's not the way God sees it. God gives us the promise of life in abundance through faith in Jesus Christ. With the promise comes the price of service and self-denial.

The other Christians recognized Stephen as a man of extraordinary gifts and abilities, and so they elected him as a deacon. In return, Stephen rose to the occasion and became a leader by losing himself in service to others. The example has been set for us to "Go and do likewise."

Stephen not only helped distribute the food to the widows and orphans, Luke goes on to say that, "Stephen, full of faith and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8)

What were some of the great wonders and signs Stephen performed? Scripture is silent. We'll never know. Safe to say it was enough to catch the attention of others – and not only fellow Christians, but Jews from all around the Mediterranean – "Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and of those of Cilicia and Asia." (Acts 6:9)

In particular, there was a group of radical extremists known as the Synagogue of the Libertines, or Freedmen. Luke says they disputed with Stephen, but "weren't able to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke." (Acts 6:9-10)

Stephen was a skilled orator who spoke with eloquence and precision. He was well versed in the Torah and Jewish history. He could hold his own with any rabbi or scribe. When it came to Jesus, he was uncompromising: Jesus was the Promised Messiah, no two ways about it. The Freedmen were no match for Stephen.

That led to a problem: With the promise of superior intellect and the gift of articulation came the price of confrontation. Luke says,

“Then they secretly induced men to say,

‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’

They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes,

and came against him and seized him,

and brought him in to the council ...”

(Acts 6:11-12)

Were Stephen less gifted, he would not have been noticed; had he been less outspoken, he would not have posed a threat to anyone. He could have stayed under the radar and lived a long and peaceful life. But he would not have made a difference, and he would not have fulfilled God’s will for his life.

Stephen stood head and shoulders above the rest; as such, he made for an easy target. When the Freedmen couldn’t shoot him down in a fair and honest debate, they got underhanded. They trumped up charges against him and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the highest court of the Jewish faith. Again, the greater the promise, the higher the price.

Stephen was now on trial for his life. He was not fazed. As one false witness after another testified against him, Stephen sat calmly, as if this was the very moment he’d been waiting for. Luke says,

“All who sat in the council, fastening their eyes on him, saw his face like it was the face of an angel.”

(Acts 6:15)

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promised the greatest blessing on those who would be persecuted on account of their faith in him. He said,

“Blessed are you when people reproach you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

(Matthew 5:11-12)

There’s a blessing in store for you if you’re willing to speak the truth of God’s Word in love.

Let me ask you this, if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? How does what you think, say and do differ from the non-Christians around you? How does the way you live contrast with those who take their cues from reality TV and TikTok? Are you giving witness with your life?

Stephen was a paragon of virtue. He talked the talk and walked the walk. As a result, he found himself with a bullseye on his back and the Jewish leaders taking aim.

When it was his turn to answer the charges brought against him, he wouldn't say a word in his own defense. Instead, he recounted the mighty acts of God – how God had made covenant with Abraham and promised to make of him a great nation ... how God had used Joseph to save the people from starvation and how, when the people of Israel became slaves in Egypt, God sent Moses to deliver them and lead them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. He went on to recall the glory days of David and how Solomon, fulfilled his dream of building a house for the Lord – a glorious temple more magnificent than anyone could have ever imagined.

Then Stephen went from preaching to pronouncing. He pointed a finger at the Jewish leaders and said,

“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears,
you always resist the Holy Spirit!

As your fathers did, so you do.

Which of the prophets didn't your fathers persecute?

They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One,
of whom you have now become betrayers and murderers.

You received the law as it was ordained by angels, and didn't keep it!”

(Acts 7:51-53)

Luke says when he said this, the Jewish leaders were cut to the heart and they gnashed their teeth at him. Stephen was hardly surprised. What else could he expect, accusing them of betraying and murdering Jesus?

Was Stephen afraid? Luke says that being filled with the Spirit, he gazed up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus – not sitting, but standing – at the right hand of God ... as if Jesus himself were testifying on his behalf. It was the final straw. Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:56)

That was it! They had heard enough! They cried out at the top of their lungs and plugged their ears. Then they dragged Stephen out of the temple and took him beyond the city wall, where they stoned him to death.

Ironically, Stephen got the last word. Even as the stones were being hurled, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” (Acts 7:59) And in his final breath, he uttered, “Lord, don’t hold this sin against them.” (Acts 7:60) Then, he died.

When a soldier or police officer is killed in the line of duty, we respectfully say, “He paid the ultimate price.” This could certainly be said of Stephen: He paid the ultimate price for his faith and devotion to Jesus Christ. He was the first in a long line of Christian

martyrs. Because of his courage and his positive influence on others, it's no wonder he has been recognized as a saint.

The story of Stephen introduces us to a soon-to-be follower of Jesus. According to Luke, those who cast the stones ...

“... placed their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul ...
(thus) Saul was consenting to his death.”

(Acts 7:58, 8:1)

The Apostle Paul was one of the zealots who played a part in Stephen's death. While he may not have cast a stone himself, he was one of the group. Little did he know what the Lord had in store for him. For he still had the blood of Stephen on his hands when the Lord struck him down on the road to Damascus and called his name and transformed him into the greatest evangelist the church has ever known.

Yet, with promise comes a price. Like Stephen, Paul died a martyr's death rather than forsake the faith. He had no regrets. In his Second Letter to Timothy, he writes,

“... the time of my departure has come.

I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course.

I have kept the faith.

From now on, there is stored up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day;

and not to me only, but also to all those who have loved his appearing.”
(2 Timothy 4:6-8)

Living in the United States we are at little risk of death for witnessing to our faith in Jesus. Just the same, this morning there are three things for us to consider about how we give witness: What particular gifts, talents and abilities has the Lord given us? What promises do our lives hold for the sake of Christ and his kingdom? Are we willing to pay the price, whatever that might look like – job loss, loss of family or friends, all for his sake?

May God give us each the courage to speak His truth in love.

Based on a sermon by Dr. Philip W. McLarty

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