

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Following Jesus' Footsteps

Those who follow Jesus will share in his suffering.

Scripture: Acts 6:1—7:2a, 44-60

Rev. Steve Filyk

April 18, 2020

Third Sunday after Easter

Opening Hymn: Rejoice, the Lord is king 267 (1-4)

Closing Hymn: The strife is o'er 257

Choruses: Lord of the dance 250 (chorus after 1/3/5), King of kings 266

In the season of Easter

We talk about the benefits of faith.

In the words of *Living Faith*

our church's statement of Christian belief:

"[Jesus'] resurrection means that our faith is not empty,
that final victory is assured over all evil powers
which destroy and deform life,
and that death, the last enemy, is conquered."ⁱ

In the season of Easter

We talk about the benefits of faith.

But if all we do

Is talk about the benefits
we give an incomplete picture.

The life of faith also has costs.

Followers of Jesus have obligations...

Obligations to gather for worship,
Christian fellowship, and service.

Followers of Jesus have commitments...

Commitments to support the church
And the surrounding community with time/talents/treasures.

Followers of Jesus face consequences...

Our values put us out-of-sync
with neighbors, even our own families.
Our cherished beliefs are practises are sometimes
Mocked and ridiculed.

In a recent Spiritual Biography

One of our presenters said that
friends who know about her spiritual practises

thought she was out of her mind.

These days there is contempt for most things Christian.
 But this puts us in good company
 With the early followers of Jesus.

Today's lesson takes us from the Gospel of Luke
 To the Acts of the Apostles.

What you should know
 Is that Luke and Acts are a two-part series.

Both books are addressed to the same person, Theophilus.
 The introduction to Acts refers back to the former book,
 of the Gospel of Luke.

Today's reading takes us into the sixth chapter of Acts.

We have fast-forwarded past Jesus' resurrection and ascension.
 We have fast-forwarded past Pentecost,
 That day where the Holy Spirit empowers the church
 To share the message of Jesus with the neighborhood.

We are now into a period where the church has expanded.
 And in that expansion, there are growing pains.

These pains first appear in the church kitchen
 In church's meals-on-wheels program.

It seems that favoritism is being shown
 to one group of widows over another.
 The Jewish women who grew up outside of Israel (Hellenistic Jews)
 were being overlooked,

while the Jewish women who grew up in Israel (Hebraic Jews)
 were being cared for.

This problem is brought to the Twelve disciples
 Who in turn, invite the church to appoint a group of deacons
 to deal with this problem.

In terms of qualifications,
 they ask for administrators
 Who are full of "the Spirit and wisdom".

Evidence of the Spirit's gracious activity
 Can be seen in the appointment of the deacons.
 The deacons that are chosen all have Greek names.

That is Hellenistic Jews are chosen
 To ensure that all the widows are being care for.

One of those deacons chosen was Stephen.
 Stephen is appointed
 to help care for the community.

But more than just being an administrator,
 Stephen is “full of God’s grace and power”
 And begins performing “great wonders and signs among the people”
 Just like the Twelve.

As I already implied, Stephen is a Hellenistic Jew.
 His work and his preaching causes conflict
 With other Hellenistic Jews,
 In particular those from the Synagogue of the Freedmen.

These Hellenist Jews has been born as slaves outside of Israel,
 But had moved back to their spiritual home-country
 after finding their freedom.

Like those who lived in the Diaspora,
 They had undoubtedly fought hard
 to keep their unique cultural/religious identity
 In the faces of a domineering Empire.

More than that,
 they had maintained this identity
 Without their freedom.

So when this Synagogue of Freedmen encountered the outspoken Stephen,
 Who was proclaiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah,
 They saw him as a threat.

But God’s Spirit was upon Stephen
 And they could not outmaneuver his wisdom.

Unable to best him in an argument
 And perceiving him as a threat,
 They falsely accuse him
 of speaking against God/Moses/the Temple/the law.

And so Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin
 The city council,
 to answer these serious charges.

What follows is speech, a sermon,

The longest of which is recorded in Acts.

Addressing the assembly as 'brothers and fathers'
 Stephen recounts the long story of the people of Israel.

He speaks about the call of Abraham.

Then he goes on (in the part we skipped over)
 To speak about Joseph and his brothers,
 About Moses and the Exodus,
 About the Tabernacle and the Temple.

Stephen highlights from their own history

The people's failure to understand God's purposes,
 And their ongoing resistance of the Holy Spirit
 Culminating in the betrayal and murder of Jesus.

This angers the council.

They are not looking for a lesson
 On their own disobedience.

But to makes them even angrier,

Stephen shares with them a vision:
 He describes heaven open "and [Jesus] the Son of man
 Standing at the right hand of God."

This enrages the gathering

Who rush at Stephen,
 drag him out of the city,
 And stone him.

As Stephen is being lynched

He speaks words clearly reminiscent of Jesus' execution.
 Stephen asks God to forgive his executioners
 And commits his spirit to his Lord.

Stephen dies.

And the church has its first martyr.

I want you to think about this all for a moment.

Stephen accepts a church appointment.
 Stephen serves the people.
 Stephen performs signs and wonders.
 Stephen gives public testimony that Jesus is Lord.

And what reward does Stephen receive for his faithfulness.

Is Stephen highlighted in the church newsletter?
 Is his service to God rewarded with blessings on
 His business or his family?

No. Stephen is killed.

In the church we often focus on the benefits of the life of faith.

But there are costs, costs to following Jesus.

Following Jesus involves a devotion of time and money
And it can also lead to conflict, persecution, and loss.

Just consider these words of Jesus

Recorded in the Gospel of Luke
even as he approached his own death.

The words of Jesus to his disciples:

“they will seize you and persecute you.

They will hand you over to synagogues
and put you in prison,
and you will be brought before kings and governors,
and all on account of my name.

And so you will bear testimony to me...

You will be betrayed even by parents,
brothers and sisters, relatives and friends,
and they will put some of you to death.

Everyone will hate you because of me.

But not a hair of your head will perish.
Stand firm, and you will win life.”ⁱⁱ

Or consider these words Jesus spoke

At the outset of his ministry:

Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
because great is your reward in heaven.
For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There are blessings in following Jesus

“[Jesus’] resurrection means that our faith is not empty,
that final victory is assured over all evil powers
which destroy and deform life,
and that death, the last enemy, is conquered.”^{iv}

But there are also costs.

You may lose friends.

You may have conflict in your own family.

You may be passed over for promotion.

But consider that this places you in good company.

It places you in the company of Jesus and of Stephen.

And it places you in the company

Of other modern-day Christians

who have been marginalised and persecuted,

Who have even lost their lives for following Jesus

And devoting their lives to what is good and true.

Above the Great West Door in Westminster Abbey (England)

you will find ten statutes dedicated to ten modern-day martyrs,

Christians who gave their lives for Jesus.

You may recognise some of the faces:

“They include civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr

and St Oscar Romero, Archbishop in El Salvador,

both of whom were assassinated;

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed by the Nazis in 1945;

and Wang Zhiming,

a pastor killed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.”^v

Suffering for Jesus puts us in their company,

Alongside Stephen and alongside our Saviour.

These heroes of faith remind us

“suffering is normal [even] expected [for Christians].

It is not outside of God’s sovereign plan.”^{vi}

Does this sound scary? Have no fear.

“The Holy Spirit will bring vital aid

in the midst of persecution...”

And just like with Stephen,

Jesus will be by our side,

until the end. Amen.

ⁱ *Living Faith* 8.1.3

ⁱⁱ Luke 21:12-15

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 6:22-23

^{iv} *Living Faith* 8.1.3

^v “Modern Martyrs” www.westminster-abbey.org/about-the-abbey/history/modern-martyrs

^{vi} John Span “Persecution in Luke and Acts” October 7, 2013 biblicalmissiology.org/2013/10/07/persecution-in-luke-and-acts/