

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2026
A Sermon Preached by Fr Ian M Delinger
on May 3, 2026

Acts 7:55-60 / Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 / 1 Peter 2:2-10 / John 14:1-14

*The sun has risen. Let us greet the day.
Christ has risen. The stone is rolled away.
Christ has risen. He has given us the victory.
Christ is alive. He has risen from the dead.
Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

The 5th Sunday of Easter every 3 years is our moment as a parish with St Stephen as our patron! It's the only Sunday when Stephen is in the readings. Stephen's story is short-lived. Stephen was so passionate about his faith in Jesus Christ that he got arrested for blasphemy. And at his trial, he recounted Salvation History, and when he got to the bit about Jesus, he said:

'They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.'

When you blame your accusers of murdering Jesus, they get a bit upset, so:

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.

And you've heard the rest. Stephen's message wasn't the problem; it was his delivery. He started out strong, and then it went all pear-shaped.

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue ...

stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

That last bit – about those who could not withstand Stephen – sort of, kind of lines up with the unworthiness expressed in 1 Peter:

The stone that the builders rejected.

Once you were not a people.

Once you had not received mercy.

Both with Stephen and with Peter, people are inferior in some way *before* they know Christ. It is in Christ that they are made new. There is a good message in there, but then, like today, people cover their ears.

Clergy hear all sorts of reasons why people don't go to Church. Along with those who won't listen to the message, like Stephen's audience, some of those reasons fit with Peter's message and are about self-worth. Like:

- *I don't think they'd let me in.*
- *Don't get me wrong pastor, I love Jesus. It's the people I can't stand!*
- *I would be struck by lightning, and I don't want to damage your church.*
- *I would spontaneously combust if I walked into a church.*
- *And even paraphrasing Groucho Marx: I wouldn't want to go to a church that would let someone like me in.*

While these might be polite-but-self-deprecating ways of expressing a disinterest in church, they also point to the issue of self-worth and to the misunderstanding of what "church" is.

How the media – other than the news – presents "church" has distorted what "church" *is*. Think of the number of times you have seen in a movie or a TV show a scene where the "baddie" main character is looked down upon by the "goodie" coming out of church dressed in their Sunday best, complete with white lace

gloves and a head covering. Or a scene in which the pastor is lecturing the congregation on the 7 Deadly Sins or on morals. Sure, some churches are like that. But that's an experience of church that is foreign to me.

There have been times when someone who I know is skeptical of religion has reluctantly come to a service. When that happens, I pay close attention to the words of the liturgy, waiting for the moment that they wince at the ridiculousness of what we're doing gathered here. That wince never comes. We praise God; we thank God; we pray for those in need; we pray for our own faults; we confess our sins. Sure, the Creed might be challenging, but that's true for regular churchgoers, too – that's not news to me.

And then we get to the Eucharistic Prayer. It's intricate tapestry of thanksgiving for what God has done in Creation and through Jesus Christ, *and* an acknowledgement of human frailty.

You formed us in Your own image and called us to dwell in Your infinite love. You gave the world into our care that we might be Your faithful stewards and show forth Your bountiful grace. But we failed to honor Your image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see Your goodness in the world around us; and so we violated Your creation, abused one another, and rejected Your love. Yet You never ceased to care for us, and prepared the way of salvation for all people.

Our worship isn't about *being perfect*. Our worship is about acknowledging our humanity in the presence of divinity. It's about loving God and loving neighbor. So, it pains me when people think that they aren't good enough to be in the presence of God. And it disturbs me that we continue to think that somehow God is confined to church buildings. But that's for a different sermon.

When we hear someone's self-deprecation – which often is presented jokingly – we need to listen to what's really being said. We need to learn the sacred act of listening that connects us to one another and to the divine.

Brené Brown is a researcher, professor, and author who studies human connection, courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, and she's an Episcopalian. I think she would have a lot to say about those who feel that they are not worthy to be in here with us today. She says:

*Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.*¹

Let's look at that more closely:

- *We are all inextricably connected*
- *by a power greater than all of us*
- *grounded in love and compassion*

That's what we do here every time we meet for worship, whether for the Eucharist, Morning Prayer or silent meditation. We gather here – in all our unworthiness or with all confidence – because *we are all inextricably connected ... by a power greater than all of us ... grounded in love and compassion*. There isn't anyone who *doesn't* need to hear that. More importantly, who *needs* to hear that? Who feels that they are unworthy, who feels:

that they cannot withstand the Good News, like those who were annoyed by Stephen;

that they are stone that the builders rejected;

that they are not a people of God;

¹ Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: Reese's Book Club: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (p. 34). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

that they have not or cannot receive mercy?

Can your sacred act of listening help those who won't listen to the message or who feel unworthy discover a pathway:

- *To be a living stone to be built into a spiritual house.*
- *To know that they are God's people.*
- *To know that they can receive mercy.*

We probably frame it incorrectly: *"Why don't you go to Church?"* That presupposes that they know *why* they should go to Church: to nurture their relationship with God through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But as Episcopalians, we have a big problem with: *"Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?"* Just saying that, scripted, in a sermon makes me feel uncomfortable. I couldn't imagine asking someone that question – outside of, maybe, spiritual direction. But that's what it's all about. That's basically what Stephen was saying in his long speech: *"You should have a personal relationship with Jesus."* And what we hear from Peter is what we *receive* from our personal relationship with Jesus.

But so many people don't know what that relationship is about. And for so many different reasons:

#1 Reason: Bad experience of church as a child. So bad that they remember their church experience as abusive...and I'm not including the victims of clergy child sexual abuse. The forcing of doctrine onto children really did some damage, particularly to the younger Boomers.

#2 Reason: The hypocrisy of the followers. Which is why Episcopalians/Anglicans don't call one another to perfection. We know that we *all* fall short of the glory of God, *and* we also know that God accepts us and calls us on this journey toward the Divine.

We try to avoid either of those ... hopefully. But these are a reality for many people.

The #3 reason for not going to church is that we now have 2 generations for whom the majority have never had any experience of church. Their parents never took them. All they know is from TV, film and the news. But we also know that some of them are yearning for *a power greater than all of us*. And within that yearning, many, regardless of age, feel a bit of unworthiness.

We are bad at our messaging because our invitation is to join us in something whose definition and meaning has been distorted to be something that we don't recognize and others find unpalatable.

Stephen is a model for us to work on our delivery. The message – the Good News – is not the problem. Is there a *via media*? What are we trying to do? Are we trying to get people to go to church? Bums on pews? Or are we inviting someone close to us to join us on this journey through which *we are all inextricably connected ... by a power greater than all of us ... grounded in love and compassion?*

More than I want to fill these pews, I want people to hear the message of love and inclusion and to know that they are

- *A living stone and part of God's house.*
- *To know that they are God's people.*
- *To know that they can receive mercy.*

I want *you* to know that you are a living stone, a beloved child of God, who receives mercy – to know that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and that we may steadfastly follow His steps in the way that leads to eternal life.

Instead of declaring, like Stephen, we need to be *listening*. In Brené Brown's book *Daring Greatly*, she quotes John O'Donohue, who was an Irish poet, author, RC priest, and philosopher:

Only holiness will call people to listen now. And the work of holiness is not about perfection or niceness; it is about belonging, that sense of being in the Presence and through the quality of that belonging, the mild magnetic of implicating others in the Presence ... This is not about forging a relationship with a distant God but about the realization that we are already within God.²

Let the holiness within you call you to listen to others. Share that God is not distant and punishing, but in the room with you, as Jesus was in the room with the Disciples, and He prepares a place for each of us. And that place – and *this* place – is one of belonging: a place where you can share your authentic self.

Through the sacred act of listening, we will hear the cries of those close to us who want to join us on this journey through which *we are all inextricably connected ... by a power greater than all of us ... grounded in love and compassion.*

² Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: Reese's Book Club: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (p. 132). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.