

Mark Labberton tells a story in his book titled *Called* (p. 25), about a visitor to the Berkley, California church Mark was serving at that time. Mark says “His tattoos were flames that licked their way up his neck to his cheekbones. I caught sight of him only from a distance while I was preaching, a visitor I had not yet had a chance to meet. But this morning we ran into each other after the service on the sidewalk, and I had a chance to see his artwork up close. He explained that he was in his late 20s, a grad student at the University of California at Berkeley, after spending a few years travelling in various bands. Recently, he was asking questions about life that he hadn’t considered for a long time and that eventually led him back to church.

He said “I go to some churches, and they talk a lot about Jesus but little about the world. I go to other churches, and they talk a lot about the world but little about Jesus. You seem to talk a lot about Jesus and a lot about the world. I know lots of people like me in this town. I don’t need to find more of us. Here’s what I want to know: If I hang out at your church, will I meet people who are actually *like* Jesus?”

Did any of you wince at that question? Depending on our personal church experience we all probably have our own response to this provocative question. “Will I meet people who are actually *like* Jesus?” If I had to answer that question for a visitor to one of our services here at Ken Mawr, I would say, “You’ll definitely meet people who know they *need* Jesus.” Or I might say, “Before I answer that, tell me a bit more about your faith experience growing up.” Most of us have heard firsthand from people who think Christians act more like judgmental religious fanatics than they act like Jesus. Many young adults in the millennial generation feel that the Christian Church bears little resemblance to the Savior it claims to follow.

In Acts chapter 7 we are shown that one of the very first Christians bears a strong resemblance to Jesus. And as we heard last week, while he was being raked over the coals in the Sanhedrin, they looked at Stephen and “*saw that his face was like the face of an angel*” (Acts 6:15). Listen to how much Stephen sounded like Jesus in this chapter when he prays, “*Lord Jesus, receive my*

spirit.” And then after falling on his knees, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*” (7:59-60). What remarkable and sacrificial love Stephen had for those who were falsely accusing him and putting him to death!

Stephen didn't have the reputation that accompanied the original disciples. The religious establishment feared the popularity of the apostles, but they decided Stephen was expendable. So, when he began to teach, they put him on trial. False witnesses were hired to create a case. Stephen made an impassioned statement, not so much in his own defense but in order to urge his opponents to give Messiah Jesus serious consideration. As he neared the end of his remarks, and his life, Stephen made some lasting statements that are definitely worth pondering.

But first, let's go back to review some of what Stephen said in the verses preceding today's Scripture that filled the Sanhedrin with rage as laid out by William Barclay in *The Acts of the Apostles* (p. 60-61). When Stephen's speech begins to accelerate, his implication is how the attitude of the Jews condemned them. Now, what was implicit becomes explicit.

- Stephen insists that they continued the disobedience of God's people since the days of Moses when they rebelled by making the golden calf. And in the time of Amos their hearts went after Molek and “*the star of your God Refan*” (v. 43). Both of them idols.
- Stephen insists they were given amazing privileges: the succession of the prophets, “*the tabernacle of the covenant law in the wilderness*” (v. 44), and the Law which was given by angels (v. 53). Stephen places these two things side by side, continued disobedience and continued privilege.
- Stephen also insists they have wrongly limited God. The temple which should have been their greatest blessing was in fact their greatest curse. They came to worship *it* instead of worshipping God (vv. 48-50).
- And lastly, Stephen insists that they have consistently persecuted the prophets (v. 52). But that's not all! The crowning charge was that they have murdered the Son of God. Stephen does not excuse them on a plea of ignorance. There is both anger and sorrow in Stephen's closing remarks. There is anger that sees the most terrible of crimes, and there is

sorrow that sees a people who have refused the destiny that God offered to them.

The opening verse of today's reading says: "*You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: you always resist the Holy Spirit!*" A speech like this could have only one result. Stephen courted death and, in the end, it was death that came. But Stephen did not see the faces around him that were distorted with rage. His gaze went beyond time and place because he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Verse 57 says, "*at this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him...*" They covered their ears, yelling at the top of their voices!? There's no way to confirm this but *in person* this scene must have looked like something from the movie Dumb and Dumber!!!

The penalty for blasphemy was indeed stoning to death, as recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 13. But please understand that this was no judicial trial. Even though the Roman administration gave the Sanhedrin the right to carry out a death sentence for an offense against the temple, this was clearly a lynching. Once again William Barclay offers some excellent insight. He says that in this scene there are certain notable things about Stephen:

First, we see his courage. Beyond anything that humans could do to him, he focused on the vision and welcome of his Lord. **Second**, we see Stephen following the Lord's example. As Jesus did, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of his executioners. And **third**, all this terrible turmoil finishes with a strange peacefulness. To Stephen came the divine gift of peace which comes to anyone who does the right thing even if the right thing kills them.

At first glance, Stephen's death may seem pointless. Here was a promising career cut short. His ministry seems to have ended in failure. Not only was he killed as a blasphemer, but his death triggered the first persecution against the entire church. That persecution was spearheaded by Saul of Tarsus, scattering the Jerusalem fellowship far and wide. Such a view of Stephen's death, however, betrays a lack of understanding of the way the Holy Spirit works. The persecution, which seemed to be a negative, was in reality a positive in the days to come. It led to the first great missionary outreach by the early church. The

enemy's attempt to stamp out the church's fire merely scattered the embers and started new fires around the world. In the words of the early church father Tertullian, the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.

The first half of the first verse of chapter 8 goes with this passage, which says: "*And Saul approved of their killing him.*" Now Saul comes on the scene, the man who was to become the Apostle to the Gentiles. He thoroughly endorses the execution of Stephen. But, as Augustine, another church father notes, "The church owes to the prayer of Stephen the Apostle Paul." No matter how hard he tried, Paul could never forget the way in which Stephen died. Stephen's life was relatively short, but he accomplished God's purpose for him in his living and his dying. It's not an exaggeration to say that Stephen was the turning point and eventually the cause of the gnawing questions Saul of Tarsus had to face that only the Lord Jesus could answer. The blood of the martyrs indeed became the seed that took root and grew the newborn church. This is never truer than with the blood of the very first Christian martyr, Stephen.

Throughout this entire passage we see in Stephen the evidence of being *full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of God's grace and power*. If we were to ask ourselves today what it would look like to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of God's grace and power, I think the answer would have to be we would look *to* Jesus and look more and more *like* Jesus. I don't mean that we ought to grow our beards or that we would wear sandals everywhere we went. I mean that Christ would be clearly evident in our lives so that others may see our faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit, as well as God's wisdom, grace, and power.

But maybe more importantly, in the midst of all the chaos and turmoil of this world, we would be people who live our lives constantly *looking to Jesus*. Isn't that the standard that Stephen set for us? Saul—later Paul—who witnessed both the bold speech and the unjust killing of Stephen put it this way in his letter to the Philippians, "*To live is Christ, to die is gain*" (1:21).

In Max Lucado's book, *And the Angels Were Silent*, he tells the story of young Matthew Huffman. Matthew was the six-year-old son of missionaries in Salvador, Brazil. One morning he began to complain of fever as his

temperature went up, and he began losing his eyesight. His mother and father put him in the car and raced him to the hospital.

As they were driving and he was lying on his mother's lap, he did something his parents will never forget. He extended his hand in the air. His mother took it, and he pulled it away. He extended it again. She again took it, and he again pulled it back and reached into the air. Confused, the little boy's mother asked him, "What are you reaching for Matthew?"

"I'm reaching for Jesus' hand," he answered. And with those words he closed his eyes and slid into a coma from which he would not awaken. Two days later he succumbed to bacterial meningitis.

Of all the things he didn't have the time to learn in his short life, Matthew had learned the most important: Who to reach for in the hour of death.

One of the most important verses in this entire book of Acts is Acts 1:8, which says, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" In God's providence and wisdom, it appears that this promise of Jesus from the first chapter of Acts would never have been fulfilled if it were not for the brave sacrificial death of Stephen.

What remarkable sacrificial love Stephen had for those who were falsely accusing him and putting him to death! In his living and in his dying he was a lot *like* Jesus because he was *looking to Jesus*. We all like the idea of doing God's work, but we dislike the reality of how much God's work may cost us.

But nothing is ever wasted, and God will never leave us. Bless his holy name! Amen.