

“If These Stones Could Talk”

May 21, 2017
Acts 7:55-60 CEV 1 Peter 2:4-10 NRSV

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Church

The stoning of Stephen. The church was still a baby when it happened. You'd think it might have derailed the whole thing – stopped the fledgling and toddling church in its tracks. But by the grace of God, the stones used to try to kill the church only helped to build the living church of Christ.

I'm going to take you through this formative story in early church history and along the way highlight what we as the Church—the Body of Christ—have to learn from it today.

The dates of the stoning of Stephen make it clear it happened in early days for the church, not long after the death of Jesus. We can tell the church was very young, because they were still figuring themselves out. It wasn't yet an institution. They didn't have a policy handbook or a manual to tell them what to do and how to act or even exactly what to believe. So when a dispute rose up, they had to figure out from scratch how to handle it.

People were unhappy and grumbling. It's comforting to know that as much as the church has changed over the years, some things never change! The argument began because the Hellenistic Christians – that is those who were Greek by background and not Jewish —felt that the Jewish widows were getting preferential treatment while their widows were being neglected. They brought the concern to Peter who was the head of the church. Peter could have said: 'This is not our concern. Our concern is the spreading of the gospel—the sharing of the good news that Jesus rose from the dead. Don't trouble me with smaller issues like widows and preferential treatment.' But he didn't. Apparently caring for widows and orphans was no less important than sharing the gospel, and from the very beginning was part of the mission – an important part of who they were. And it was easy for Peter to see that if both of these missions, the sharing of the good news and caring for the needy – were going to be done well, they needed to designate and appoint people to each task.

That's the first lesson for us this morning. The heart of our mission as a church today has not changed. We must be about both the caring for those in need and the sharing of the Good News of Jesus: justice and evangelism. Neither can be neglected. Wall Street United Church I believe

does both well, and we need to continue to see both as vitally important to our purpose.

Stephen was chosen and recognized as someone who had a deep faith and a commitment to serve. They did a laying on of hands: he was ordained to the special work of caring for those who were in need.

Stephen was full of faith and he publicly talked about Jesus—which angered some in the Religious community – after all, they thought they had taken care of these silly and blasphemous people when they killed the leader; Jesus. As with the leader before him, some presented false testimonies about Stephen and had him hauled into the council of the Jewish synagogue where he was questioned. There Stephen preached to them and accused them of opposing God and killing the Messiah— God’s Chosen One. Funnily enough, Stephen’s sermon didn’t go over too well.

Enraged, they hauled him outside to stone him to death. Even through this unimaginable sentence Stephen focused on heaven – and he was able to see clearly the throne of heaven and even as he gave his life fully to Jesus in service, so too he gave himself to Jesus in this hour of his death. He forgave those who were in the act of murdering him, commended his spirit to God and died.

As with Stephen, one of the greatest gifts we have as followers of Jesus is that in the most difficult storms and life-challenges, if we focus on Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life, we can experience peace that makes no sense given our circumstances. No matter what you are going through today, look to heaven. You are not alone.

This stoning should have shut the early church down. You would think that the new followers, particularly the many who had never actually met Jesus but were only hearing about him, would think that the price of following Jesus was too high. But it seemed to do almost the opposite. In that mysterious way that only God can accomplish, what was meant for evil ended up being transformed into something good. God still does this today. God will take our brokenness and transform it into something life-giving as we place it in his hands.

The stoning of Stephen helped to shape and perhaps even build the early church. Not immediately of course. It got worse before it got better. God’s time is different from our time, but God is faithful and God is good.

Now the story of Stephen is intricately connected to the story of another – the apostle Paul. You see Paul was there that day. He was still known as Saul. When people set about the heinous business of stoning Stephen they put their most expensive garments, their cloaks, down at the feet of Saul to guard. Saul was there to hear the words of forgiveness that

Stephen spoke but they had no effect that day. There was no great conversion that day, but one of the greatest conversions in the history of Christianity was coming to town and it had Saul's name on it.

Saul didn't know Jesus. He would meet him soon. But at this point in time Saul's agenda was to squash the infant church like a bug. Saul's drive to persecute and eradicate the early church was almost irrational, and it only escalates. The verses that immediately follow the story of the stoning of Stephen go like this:

“And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” Acts 8:1-3

It was 'while Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord' that he traveled the road to Damascus. It was on that road that he was blinded by a light. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying: "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" He responded "Who are you Lord?" And the reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." It is curious that the voice did not say "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting my church?" or "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting these innocent people?" No, the voice of Jesus said you are persecuting *me*.

You see the incredible thing is that *those people*, the early church, were totally and completely connected with Jesus. As the theologian, Richard Rohr says: "There is a complete, almost organic union between Christ and those who love God." As Peter writes in 1 Peter, we who follow Jesus are the living stones that make up the church.

“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

When you decide to follow Jesus, you become a part of the Church and also a part of Jesus. You become one with him. You are a living stone that is integral to the building of the church of Jesus.

We must place our lives in the hands of the master builder fully and completely. We are not promised an easy life; we *are* promised abundant life.

Paul became one of the greatest apostles and missionaries of the church. It is hard to imagine the church without him. After meeting Jesus that day on the road to Damascus, there was no turning back. If he had

been zealous in his persecution of the church before, he became even more zealous in the spreading of the real and good news of Jesus. That the early church accepted Paul into their ranks is a miracle. We too are called not to judge someone's past but to recognize the transforming power of a relationship with Jesus.

What Stephen knew, and what Paul came to know is that the abundant life of Jesus is worth any hardship or persecution. Other Christians throughout history have known that first hand. It's worth it. It's worth it.

This is a prayer written by John Wesley. It is a beautiful prayer of surrender—a prayer that Stephen and Paul could have said with conviction. It is this kind of willing surrender that built the church and that continues to build the church today.

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

*Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.*

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

*And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.*

So be it.

*And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.*

The stone that the builders rejected became the most important stone of all: the Cornerstone. We are called to be living stones in the church of Christ Jesus. There is a cost to following—it's not for the faint of heart. The cost may be financial, it may be reputation, it may be energy or even your very life. There is a cost, but the cost is nothing to compare to what you will gain.

My mind goes to another person who understood that whatever the cost, following is worth it. On April 3rd, 1968 in Memphis Tennessee, on the eve of the day he was assassinated, Martin Luther King gave a speech. Towards the beginning of that famous speech he says:

“And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me,

"Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" (From there King takes the audience through a brief history of the Bible and the world and he mentions significant times and each time he says "but I wouldn't stop there.") And finally he says: Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will



be happy." And he goes on to say: "Now that's a strange statement to make because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick, trouble is in the land, confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men in some strange way are responding. Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same: "We want to be free.""

He goes on in his speech and concludes it this way:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!"

Stephen who gave his life and Paul who gave his life knew that cost and had absolutely no regrets. You see they gained an abundant life beyond compare. The early church had many struggles and by all accounts should not have survived past infancy. The church today is a lot older and it continues to struggle and at times it seems like there's no way it could possibly survive. But there is work to do. There's just as much work to do

as there was in 1968. Our world, our community needs each one of us to be the Church.

As we commit to being living stones used by the master in the building of the church—however he wants to use us, by the grace of God the church will live and by the grace of God people who desperately need to be set free will know the transforming love of Jesus. Thanks be to God.