

Loving Our Enemies: The Example of St. Stephen - Tyler Merrill

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

You have probably noticed that the Old Testament readings in the lectionary have been replaced the past several weeks with readings from the book of Acts. It seems that our worship, in these weeks following Easter, is inviting us to remember that Jesus has been resurrected and to ask the question, “So what happens next?”

Thus far in the story of Acts, the resurrected Christ has ascended into heaven. The Holy Spirit has come upon the disciples at Pentecost in the birth of the Church (the Church’s 4th of July, if you will). Christ has been openly proclaimed as the true Lord of the whole world, for which the apostles have already suffered persecution and imprisonment, specifically at hands of the Jews.

This is where we pick up today in the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Asking, “What happens next?” this morning yields a heavy answer: death. Almost all of the names that we’ve read this morning were of people who were put to death: Stephen, Saul, Peter, and Jesus.

This begs a very serious question, which was raised by a friend of mine in a New Testament class this semester: “Should true Christians be seeking martyrdom? Should we look for places to go and die for the faith?” We are not the first generation to ask this question.

For the first 300 years of the Church, Christians were heavily persecuted, and suffering and martyrdom were in a sense “par for the course.” It was a clear way to identify the “marks of a true Christian.” However, in the 4th century, when Constantine rose to power and embraced Christianity, persecution ceased throughout the Roman Empire and Christianity started to become the popular religion.

When Christians no longer ran the risk of being put to death for their faith, they had to start asking themselves, “Then what are the true marks of a Christian?” For many, monasticism became the answer. Renouncing worldly possessions, pleasures, and power, Christians began flocking to the deserts in great numbers. Monasticism became the new martyrdom. It became a way for Christians to distinguish themselves as disciples of Jesus Christ in a world full of “Christians.”

What are the marks of a true disciple?

This is a question Christians have been asking, and answering differently, throughout history. And answers should be different—the gospel doesn’t look the same in every culture at every time. However, the same Spirit fills Christians in every culture and every time, so while outward marks may well vary, we should expect some inward dispositions to remain constant.

Stephen exemplifies one of these constants beautifully. That is, Christians in all times and all places must love their enemies. We know that Stephen loved his enemies in that he died for them. In doing so, he became much more than a martyr—he became a saint.

To call Stephen a martyr takes away so much of the beauty of his example. We all think of a martyr as one who is killed for his or her beliefs. But what greatness is there in that? Terrorists will die for their beliefs (they will also kill). Soldiers will die for their beliefs (and they will also kill). Many of us, I’m sure, would be willing to die for something we believe to be good. But did Jesus die for his beliefs? We would not say that. Jesus did something much greater; he died for his enemies. He died for us, while we

were yet sinners, in the hope of reconciliation, and in the hope of friendship.

Jesus was not a martyr, and neither was Stephen. Stephen is something much greater, he is a saint.

This morning, I want to relieve you of any burden you might feel to seek martyrdom (if there are a few in the crowd). But in its place comes an even harder commandment: to love your enemies. I doubt anybody here is worried about being killed for being a Christian; but I reckon most of us have an enemy, or even a few. So let's turn to St. Stephen, and try to figure out how the heck we could possibly come to love them.

In our reading for today we stumbled in on the last minutes of Stephen's life, so let's back up a little bit and figure out who he is and why he is being stoned to death.

Well, it turns out Stephen is a pretty hate-able guy; the Scriptures introduce him as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, who spent his days distributing food to poor widows. While he was doing this, Jews came along and entered into debates with him (about what exactly, we do not know) but we are told that they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. So, in the fashion of every teenager who is made to look stupid in an argument, the Jews resorted to spreading rumors about Stephen. (This would make for a good episode of Gossip Girl.)

Saying that Stephen was speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God, they stirred up the people until they seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the highest group of religious authority in Jerusalem. It had 71 members, including chief priests, elders, and scribes. This was the same council that Jesus had stood before not long ago.

Before the council, Stephen delivers the longest speech recorded in the book of Acts. Basically, Stephen reminds the council that their ancestors never recognized the prophets that God sent them. They were jealous of Joseph and sold him into slavery. It even took them awhile before they recognized Moses. Likewise, they did not recognize Jesus, and became "betrayers and murderers" of the "Righteous One." Stephen also reminded the council that their ancestors turned from God in the wilderness, and worshiped a golden calf. Then he pretty much told them that they were doing the same thing worshiping in the Temple, for both the calf and the Temple were made by human hands.

As to be expected, the Jews were outraged. They drug Stephen out of the city, and put him to death. So what do we have to learn from Stephen about how we can love our enemies? Well, the first thing he shows us (in a two-page speech) is that we need to tell our enemies the truth. Christians have to be a people that tell the truth, and this is stinkin' hard—partly because telling the truth requires confrontation.

I hate confrontation. Elise can attest to that. I remember one day I knew I had to confront her about something (and it was a hard truth), and I just walked around all day feeling like I had been kicked in the groin. You know that feeling? I sat next to her in class, had lunch with her, all the while trying to work myself up to tell her... I didn't—but she knew something was bothering me. She texted me later that night to ask. I told her, "Yeah, let's meet up." So I slouched over to the library as woefully as I could, taking every possible second to make it down the stairs, and sat down with her in the corner. Then I asked her how her day was—fine. What have you been doing?—just class. Then I said (I'm not kidding), as I looked at the wall behind her—that's a really weird stain, isn't it? Then she snapped, "What is bothering you?!" I finally told her.

Telling the truth is hard. Being a Christian is hard. Christians have to be a people that tell the truth. Reconciliation is hardly possible without it.

And reconciliation has to be the motivation for telling the truth. For I've heard people speak the truth for two different reasons: either for reconciliation, or in order to establish distance. This is when we tell people the truth—we tell people that they hurt us—so they understand why we never want to speak to them again, why we don't answer their texts or phone calls, why we are no longer friends. Christians do not get to speak the truth for such reasons. Jesus tells us to love our enemies. We must tell the truth in hope of reconciliation.

But what does it mean to tell the truth in hope of reconciliation?

Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" There are many rooms. To tell the truth in hope of reconciliation is to tell the truth hoping your enemy gets a room as well.

In Father's house there will be a table at which we will all eat. This Table is an extension of that table. Do you long to sit and eat with your enemies at this Table? Stephen did. He spoke the truth in hope of reconciliation. And he did so—get this—even when he knew his enemies were going to hate him for doing it. He knew they were going to stone him! But he also knew that telling the truth was the only shot they had at genuine reconciliation.

It's hard enough to tell the truth when we know people will listen! But to tell our enemies the truth when we know they will hate us for it? Who can do that? Who desires reconciliation with their enemies so greatly that they would die for it? Who loves their enemies as deeply as Stephen?

It seems impossible. Thinking about my enemies, especially one that I know would hate me if I told him the truth, I feel defeated. The truth would enrage him and I don't think he would ever look at me the same way again. Even so, it's probably the only real shot we have at genuine reconciliation—but I'm still not courageous enough to tell him. Who loves their enemies as deeply as Stephen? And how do they do it?

One answer might lie in the beginning of today's text: "When they [the Jews] heard these things [the truth] they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit..." And there it is. I am incapable of telling my enemies the truth: "But filled with the Holy Spirit..."

Jesus said the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth. I wonder if this is part of what he meant.

The Scriptures go on to say, "Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' He recites a line from Psalm 31. And here lies another key as to how we can learn to love our enemies: by praying the Psalms. Ben Wayman has a book coming out soon entitled, *Make the Words Your Own: An Early Christian Guide to the Psalms*. In the foreword to the book, Stanley Hauerwas says this: 'By the singing of the words we become what we sing. We become what we sing because the Psalms do not so much give voice to what we are but rather they make us who we were created to be.' We were created to be a people that love our enemies.

It is important to remember, though: Stephen recited a psalm from memory, but he would not have had a psalter. This was ages before the printing press! Stephen didn't have a Bible to carry around. So how

did he learn the Psalms? He learned them by being a part of a faithful community that regularly sang them together.

That faithful community is so important! Sure, there are times when it devastates the individual—churches are, after all, filled with people—but there are times when its beauty astonishes the world. Perhaps some of you remember when, in 2006, a shooting took place in an Amish one-room schoolhouse in Pennsylvania. A gunman took hostages, shot ten girls (ages six through thirteen), killing five, and then killed himself.

On the day of the killings, a grandfather of one of the murdered girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, “We must not think evil of this man.” Hours after the shooting, Amish community members visited, comforted, and offered forgiveness to the shooter’s family—his parents, his wife that was now widowed, and their kids. One Amish man held the shooter’s sobbing father in his arms for more than an hour. It was reported that there were more Amish at the shooter’s funeral than non-Amish, and they even invited the widowed wife to the funeral for their daughters.

Some people were outraged by the Amish’s response, arguing that forgiveness is inappropriate when no remorse has been expressed, that it doesn’t make sense. And they are absolutely right. Christianity makes no sense.

Turning back to our brother Stephen... “He prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.”

So may we, with the example of the saints, the words of the psalms, the love of the community, and the power of the Holy Spirit become the people we were created to be—people that love our enemies and forgive those who trespass against us. May we become people whose lives make no sense.