

Stephen - Full of Spirit and Good Sense

Acts 6:1-15, 7:54-8:2 by Patty Friesen (June 3/18)

After scripture sing: Good King Wenceslas. After sermon: We Shall Walk #412 HWB

Stephen is remembered for his faith as the first Christian martyr and his feast day is celebrated December 27. We first hear of Stephen in Acts 6 as a man full of the Holy Spirit and good sense. There is no better accolade in the book of Acts than that.

Author Luke alerts us to Stephen's spiritual authority and his Christ-like attributes. But beyond administrative duties and the gift of healing, in the early church, he has a gift for public speaking as well. This leads to opposition from a religious group called the Freedom, Greek Jews also like Stephen but who had political influence. They argued with Stephen but could not withstand the combination of wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke so they resort to tricks to subvert his influence. They say that Stephen speaks blasphemous words against Moses and God, that he speaks against the temple and claims that Jesus will destroy the temple.

Luke shapes Stephen's trial to parallel Jesus' trial with false accusations and death. Stephen's response is Spirit-filled and exemplary. He accepts his fate as the prophets of God had before him. Stephen declares that Christ's body, his death and resurrection is the central symbol of faith, not the Temple, not Torah or any institution of Jewish religion which seals his death sentence. Stephen's stoning confirms that followers of Christ will share in his death as well. In his death, Stephen exemplifies Christian discipleship - following Christ whatever the cost and his death legitimizes the truth of his witness. He dies in imitation of Christ, praying, Receive my spirit and do not hold this sin against them.

Similar to Jesus' dying words, Stephen prays for the forgiveness of his enemies at the very moment of their apparent triumph over him. He prays for their salvation. It is what and for whom he prays, that gives his death its most profound meaning for included among Stephen's enemies is Saul. Prayers that petition God for the forgiveness of another are important for Luke: They make second chances for spiritual renewal possible. And Saul in his own trial in Acts 22, references Stephen's death and prayer for forgiveness as a turning point in his conversion. And so we must pray for our enemies and do so every time we pray the Lord's Prayer.

Stephen's death marks a radical turning point in Acts. It's a power of a moment that changed the course of Christianity. For on that day, severe persecution began. The apostles are no longer safe to testify in public and they are kicked out of the Temple and synagogues and take their movement underground into homes which shapes their identity around shared meals and mutual aid. Under persecution, they are scattered from Jerusalem to the far reaches of the Roman Empire.

In the spirit of Stephen who was full of the Holy Spirit and Good Sense - we will hear several stories of others who were also full of the Spirit and Good Sense who have gone before us.

Story #1: Annie Funk, the first female Mennonite missionary grew up in Hereford General Conference Mennonite Church near Bally, Pennsylvania. At the 1899 General Conference Annual Delegate Session, delegates heard about the urgent needs in India that had been ravaged by famine. It was at those sessions, delegates began emergency relief and mission work in India. Annie had been working for the YMCA in New Jersey and in 1906 volunteered to go to India. She founded a village school for

girls in a mud hut and began her work as a teacher. The school initially had 17 students and over the next 50 years, 3500 girls attended.

In March 1912, Annie received a telegram that her mother was ill and she should return home. She left her work in Janjgir, India, travelling by train and boat to England. She was to board the SS Haverford for the final leg of her journey back to America but was guided to another ship, the Titanic, which would supposedly get her home in record time. She celebrated her 38th birthday on April 13 and on April 15, the Titanic struck an iceberg and sank and Annie with it. Annie believed that the love that drew her to Christ would draw the people of Janjgir as well. Over a century later, she is remembered for her faith and what she has done.

Story #2: Chief Seattle was born in a Suquamish village along Puget Sound in 1786. As chief, it fell to Seattle to set a strategy for dealing with the arrival of settlers to Puget Sound. He rejected the option of violent resistance and put his trust in the possibilities of peaceful dialogue. In 1830, he converted to Christianity. As a leader of his people, he tried to integrate the principles of his faith with the beliefs of his ancestors. But eventually he came to believe that he was caught between conflicting spiritual values.

In 1855, he wrote to President Franklin Pierce with these haunting and prophetic words:

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us...Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every learning and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. We are part of the earth and it is part of us.

One thing we know, which the White Man may one day discover - our God is the same God. He is the God of humanity and his compassion is equal for the red man and the white. The earth is precious to him, and to heart the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.

Chief Seattle died on June 7, 1866 on the Port Madison Reservation near the city which today bears his name.

Let's pray: Gracious God who has given us the power of the Holy Spirit and good sense, give us also courage to walk in your good way, to use the gifts you have given us and the unique timing of our calling to serve you even if it costs us. Amen.