

A Stone in the Hand

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Texts: Acts 7:55-60, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

It is the 5th Sunday in Eastertide, and things take a distinctively sobering turn – the story of Stephen. It is the weeks following the resurrection of Jesus, and the idealistic band of believers – living in community, growing in numbers, and ‘having the goodwill of all the people’ as we just heard in Acts last week – this group is now confronted with a harsh new reality: Stephen arrested by the religious authorities and stoned to death. And we have to realize this is not only a tragic death, this is a rude awakening for all the followers of Jesus on a profound level: the stark realization that being a part of this group is not going to be about taking the road to the top of the heap.

And if that seems obvious to us, it wasn’t to them, those post-resurrection followers. If you are familiar with the Gospel narratives, you may know that one theme woven throughout is that Jesus’ followers often ask if Jesus is going to put Israel back in charge – a harking back to the glory days of King David’s reign with Jesus the Messiah bringing back the good times. Over and over Jesus had to say: ‘that’s really not the point of all this’ & ‘God’s timing is really none of your business’ (my liberal paraphrase of the Greek). So then do all those expectations change with Jesus’ death and resurrection? – well, no: look back a few weeks to the Emmaus story, part of what those 2 on the road say is how they had hoped Jesus was the one to reestablish Israel; and if you look at Acts 1 at the Ascension of Jesus (a story that in church time we will go back to in a couple of weeks), it is after Jesus’ resurrection and they still

ask: ‘is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ Perhaps this remarkable resurrection now means that Jesus is the one to put them back in charge after all! But Jesus says again: ‘God is the one in charge of timing...and the power you are receiving is the power of the Spirit making you witnesses’. Yet such desires aren’t easily quenched...and as this early church grows and thrives and gains favor...it seems to really be happening...! And then, things take a distinctively sobering turn: Stephen, a new leader of this new community; Stephen witnessing, healing and serving; Stephen arrested; Stephen stoned. What have these followers signed up for after all? – leading Israel to glory clearly does not look like this.

So this is a pivotal moment for the church: the death of Stephen, the death of some dreams for the church; there is a need for making sense of Stephen’s death, making sense of what it is to be the church. So, if not the group in charge, well then perhaps this is the persecuted people – the church of martyrs – offering all for the sake of truth. Clearly this is a huge swing from the idea of leading Israel back to glory, but the martyrdom of Stephen possesses a powerful sense of identity, purpose, cohesion – a group united in standing for something of life and death significance. The persecution of early Christians ebbed and flowed, but to be a part of the early church was indeed to have your life on the line, as religious and political authorities could at any time turn being a Christian into a capital offense. And ever since, the idea and reality of martyrdom has been an important thread and identity in Christianity – those whose lives were taken as a result of their faith.

Stephen stoned – the first martyr – a shift from the triumphant to the persecuted church, giving all for the gospel. But there is something else we need to look at in this story; someone else. It is the remarkable detail included about Saul: ‘they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their

coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.’ Now this with the coats is an unfamiliar practice to us, but basically this is Saul being the clerk for the stoning – done decently and in good order. I don’t mean to be flippant, but it’s important to realize all that’s happening here. It is not only that this is Saul who we will later know as Paul who becomes one of the great leaders of the early church – yes the narrative of the conversion of Saul/Paul is crucial; but it’s also that we see that this event is certified not as an act of mob violence but as a RELIGIOUS event – this is a stoning done with the proper protocol to certify divine approval.

And I think what is so intriguing about that is that it turns this story into a vivid picture of the 2 sides of religion that can be expressed: religion giving its life and taking life. And what that makes this story into is not just a narrative of the persecuted church or just a setup for the conversion of Saul/Paul – but also a word that has the ability to speak to the church when it becomes the one with the power. And that position of power is a later narrative for the church with which we are much more familiar - a narrative of power that often looked far too much like the figure of Saul – the church in power often used that power to enforce its position through force – a divine authority given to sanctify its actions – violence certified religiously necessary and good.

Well – so – so it has been; in the narrative of the church we know, the church has played both roles in this story – the martyr and the religious power. And I wonder if you would ask folks today, ask yourself, ‘what is the church’s role today?’ – I wonder what the answers would be...? It seems to me that both identities for the church run deep in Christendom’s DNA. You can hear voices that characterize the church as a persecuted people in today’s world – under attack by a secular culture, threatened by other religions, betrayed from within by deceivers; and there is a

strong identity in such a message, rallying people to stand against the persecution. And you can hear voices telling the church to take charge again – to regain power and position that has been lost from what was once a Christian nation, a Christian world – the need to reassert Christian values and enforce Christian beliefs. It seems to me those are often the roles, the choices, given for the church – martyr or authority, persecuted or powerful. But I wonder if there is a more excellent way...

Well let's take a moment, and listen to a different stoning story - this one from the Gospel of John:

The scribes and the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery;⁴ they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?". Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Of all the remarkable things in this story, here's a particularly interesting one I think – when Jesus says: 'let anyone without sin, throw the first stone'...do you realize who COULD throw a stone? – Jesus! – he is without sin. And so a remarkable picture emerges here – what we see in this story is what God is doing not just in this situation, but in the entire incarnation of Jesus: God is responding to sinful, broken, needy world as only God has the right and ability to do – God takes in God's hand a stone, and hurls it at the world...and (to quickly mix images by going to the I Peter lesson!) what we discover is that it is a living stone – a stone to give life. God, the only one with any right to condemn, instead takes up a stone to bring, build, life.

God takes a stone in the hand, a living stone, and flings it into a manger, into history, into life; God flings God's own self into a broken world – to teach, to heal, to forgive, to love, to live, to die, to rise – a living stone.

And here's the thing – Jesus is not simply a martyr, one given his identity through persecution and suffering – no, Jesus lived with an identity of love and purpose that death had no power over, an identity of love and life that his resurrection made clear. And, Jesus is not a religious authority, given his identity by enforcing God's reign. Instead, Christ is something much different, he is the way of life, the embodiment of life as God intends, that frees people in any circumstance – martyr or authority or anywhere in between – to live out their identity as his followers, as those who walk the path of life.

You see, God takes the church too in God's hand...as living stones. I Peter says Jesus is the living stone, and we are living stones too – God flings the church, living stones, to share the way of life that God gives in Christ. There will be times to suffer for faith and times for faith as a power to shape our world – but our identity is not to see ourselves as either persecuted or powerful – our calling is to use our circumstances to witness to what God has done – the way of reconciliation, of community, of forgiveness, of abundance, of life. And wherever people are persecuted for such ways, whoever it is, we stand with them to witness to God's Spirit of life over death. And whenever religion is used to control, to diminish, for violence, we stand to witness against it, believing the way of Christ embodies a different path.

And this is no soft spoken, passive way. If you look at Stephen, he spoke boldly to power; if you look at the images of I Peter, Christ is a stumbling block to the ways

of darkness; to the woman, Jesus says: 'sin no more'. This is not soft spoken or passive, but a call to undo the ways of death and witness to the ways of life.

It is a while after Easter, and things take a sobering turn. But it does not dim or diminish Easter but deepens it, as the witness to life over death touches here too: we see life sometimes through Stephen, and sometimes through Saul/Paul, in persecution and in power. Which turns us mostly see ourselves as a living stone in God's hand – a very different kind of stoning story: as with Christ, so with us, to be used to show God's ways of mercy and life. Thanks be to God. AMEN