

“What We Witness”

Acts 7:55-60

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Last weekend a whole gaggle of Edgewood folks retreated to Lake Michigan. We spent the weekend immersed in community and in scripture, exploring the Eastertide stories of Jesus’ resurrection appearances with the disciples. Most of these stories feature some sort of bread and by the end of the weekend we not only read about bread but we made bread and we ate bread and we broke bread together. It was a lot of bread. And it was a lot of Jesus. And it was a lot of comfort.

The whole Eastertide season is largely one of comfort. It is the joy and hope after a Lenten season of yearning and fasting. It is the love and abundance after the fear and turmoil of Holy Week. Eastertide is 50 days devoted to rejuvenating our spirits and building up the beloved community of Jesus’ followers, then and now. The exception to the stories of courageous community and comforting carbs is the story we read today, a narrative that can be shocking with its violence and shake us back from abundant life to the unjust death of Stephen.

Stephen was one of the disciples in the early Christian church. He is described earlier in the Book of Acts as “a man full of faith and the holy Spirit.” Stephen was one of seven people chosen to focus his ministry and service to care for the widows in the community, especially making sure they were given enough to eat. His job was literally to feed the poor. Stephen came under attack for things that he was teaching about God and Jesus. He finds himself in the middle of a fight in his faith community about interpretations of their shared religious traditions. During this fight, Stephen delivers a scathing sermon that traces its way from Abraham to Jacob and

from Joseph to Moses, until it reaches the pinnacle of his message: he accuses those he is fighting with of being responsible for the betrayal and death of Jesus.

Stephen is full of passion and deep faith, but lacks the tact necessary to persuade his listeners to listen to him. His sermon enrages his opponents. They take off their jackets, give them to a guy named Saul to hold on to, and then they proceed to attack Stephen with stones until he is murdered. This is an ugly story. By all accounts – Stephen was an innocent man who was murdered in a violent, awful way. Nothing he said or did deserved the penalty of death. Stephen would go on to be known as the first Christian martyr, fearlessly dying for his faith, and he is the namesake to the St. Stephen's churches we know and love today.

So, why now? Why in the midst of one of our most joyful seasons in the church, are we presented with such a different scripture text? One reason might be because there is no season – in scripture and in life – that is full of joy and completely devoid of death. As humans, we are built on dichotomies – we simultaneously experience joy and sorrow, hope and fear, life and death. Our attempts to separate them often fail and only serve as reminders of how little control we have. Even in the midst of standing in the awe of resurrection and new life, there is ample evidence of suffering and death.

We are witnesses to the world around us, and Stephen's story is a reminder that death often breaks in when we least expect it. Just this week we can point to the murder of Jordan Neely on the subway in New York City or yesterday's mass shooting at a Texas outlet mall that left nine dead. The placement of Stephen's story reminds us of the shocking jolt violence often gives us when it breaks into our consciousness. It teaches us that violence effects not just those from whom it is done to, or those who commit it, but also those who witness it.

In Stephen's story, Saul is the witness to this act of violence. He is not one of the people

fighting with Stephen. He is not one of the people who picks up the stones and harms him, but he is the witness to these things. The next verses after this passage ends reveal that Saul quickly moves from being a witness to the one who commits the violence. Stephen's death incited a persecution of Christians and it is Saul who goes out and ravages the church, entering house after house, dragging off men and women to prison. It appears that by being a witness to this violence, Saul's spirit is further corrupted. He transforms from bystander to perpetrator. Saul demonstrates for us the way complicity to violence and committing violence are wrapped up in each other.

Whenever I hear this story, I wonder about the violence that people do to each other and even more: I wonder about the violence we are all witnesses to. It surrounds us, it penetrates otherwise joyful days when we least expect it. It marks us. When we hear stories of innocent people dying, we carry them with us, carry what we have witnessed.

There are many Stephen's today – innocent people who incite rage in someone else because of their faith or where they are from or the color of their skin or their station in life. I ask myself what I'm supposed to do with these images. What am I supposed to do with the stories and the people whose lives and deaths I am a witness to? How do I faithfully carry them with me in a way that honors their lives and works to end this kind of violence?

Saul carried Stephen with him from that day on. When Saul finally repents from his actions and recounts the acts of evil he has committed in his life, it is Stephen he speaks of by name. This is important to note because Saul does not do evil forever. Saul turns his life around. He promises to commit no more violence and to make up for all the terrible acts that he has committed. He is baptized, changes his name to Paul, and goes on to become a leader in the same church he persecuted, in Stephen's church, In Christ the peacemaker's church.

Saul becomes Paul and leaves his former life behind him, but he does not leave Stephen

behind. Later in his writings, he references Stephen's death and his role as a witness. I often wonder if some of Paul's commitment to his ministry and spreading God's love was in some way born of out his memory of Stephen and his complicity to his death.

Paul reminds me that violence and hatred does not define who we are and that God gives everyone a chance for redemption. This is truly what God's grace is about. It does not bring back the lives that have been taken away too soon. But it allows us the opportunity to do it different next time. If we are a witness, God's grace allows us to speak up and speak out against what we have seen. If we have been a perpetrator, God's grace allows us to make a different choice the next time our anger flares. Our God is a God of second chances and even when we are involved in the worst kind of hate, God says, "That doesn't have to be the final story. There is more to come. I have hope for you."

I struggled with Stephen's story this week. It seems like this season, like many seasons before it, we have been witnesses to enough violence. I didn't want to add another story to it. And yet, through Saul there is hope that this story is not the end. Much like the Good Friday experience it mirrors, there is still time for life to transform from violence to hope, to build up communities that choose love over fear and life over death.

The question I take from Stephen this morning is the one I ask from Paul's perspective: having witnessed death, how you allow it to transform you? When you carry the pain of violence with you, will you use that pain to bring healing to someone else? Paul, reminds us that we cannot ignore those things which we are witness to, no matter how much we would like to forget them. But we can transform ourselves *because* we have seen them – becoming bearers of hope and forgiveness and love in the face of so much pain and sorrow. This Eastertide season, Stephen's life and tragic death remind us of the stakes of what happens when we do not choose

life, when we reject the ways of love and compassion, when we turn back from resurrection joy.

It is an Eastertide story that reminds us of how much we need beloved community, how much we need healing and comfort, and how much we need God's forgiving grace to guide us every step of the way. May it be so.