



Easter 7 – Ascension Sunday

Mother's Day

May 13, 2018 – 9:00 a.m.

Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

Theme: STEPHEN'S STEADFAST STAND: COULD WE—DO WE—MAKE IT?

Sermon Text: Acts 7:54-60 (NIV)

The Stoning of Stephen

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

I used to grind my teeth in my sleep. Two of my sons have inherited that trait from me. In order to prevent damage to your teeth, you have to wear a protective mouthguard—kind of

like the ones that athletes wear during practice and in games. I imagine that grinding one's teeth at night is a way that the body deals, subconsciously, with pent-up stress. Truth be told, there are far more destructive ways to alleviate stress. Subconsciously grinding your teeth isn't the same thing as actively **"gnashing"** them like the members of the Sanhedrin do in our text. Luke tells us that Stephen—one of the original seven deacons the apostles chose to help in the distribution of food to the widows in the church in Jerusalem—was falsely accused of blasphemy and hauled before the Sanhedrin, the same Jewish Ruling Council that had falsely accused Jesus of the same crime. After laying out the history of God's dealings with His people Israel in concise detail, Stephen concluded his speech with the following denunciation :

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it" (Acts 7:51-53)

Stephen's condemnation immediately precede the words of today's sermon text. And how did those hypocritical religious leaders react to what they perceived as insolence on Stephen's part? Luke writes, **"When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him."** Stephen's message was, for his hearers, flagrant blasphemy—in both its content and its tone. While his purpose was to denounce the status quo mentality that had grown up around the land, the law and the temple—thus clearing a path for a positive response to Jesus as Israel's Messiah—the Sanhedrin clearly saw it as a frontal attack against the Jewish religion in its official and popular forms. And in their eyes, its assumed prophetic stance coupled with its obnoxious liberal spirit must have represented the worst of both Jewish Hellenism and the budding Christian movement. So, Luke notes, **"they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him."**

But Stephen wasn't done testifying. In fact, far from it! He added fuel to the fire when, **"full of the Holy Spirit,"** he **"looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"**

A few years earlier, Jesus had stood before this same tribunal and was condemned for answering affirmatively the high priest's question as to His being Israel's Messiah and for saying of Himself, **"And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the**

Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:52). Now Stephen was saying, in effect, that his vision confirmed Jesus’ claim and condemned the council for having rejected Him. Unless the council members were prepared to repent and admit their awful error, they had no option but to find Stephen guilty of blasphemy just like they’d found Jesus guilty of it. Were Stephen judged only an impertinent apostate, the 39 lashes of Jewish justice would’ve been sufficient. But to be openly blasphemous before the council (as they deemed him to be) was a matter demanding his death.

Stephen was chosen as one of the original 7 deacons precisely because the apostles and the early Church knew him to be **“full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,” “full of faith,”** and **“full of God’s grace and power”** (Acts 6:3,5,8). Luke says that when he stood before the bench to begin his defense, the members of the council **“looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of angel”** (v. 15). They must’ve known they were messing with the wrong Marine! But they weren’t swayed either by his angelic appearance or by his harsh. To link **“the glory of God”** and **“the Son of Man”** like Stephen did—along with testifying that he saw **“heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”**—affirmed what Stephen believed with all his heart: that Jesus truly was God’s divine Son!

How did the Sanhedrin react to what they? Instead of crushing them in repentance, like it should’ve, Luke says, **“At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”** Stephen’s message—deemed outrageous blasphemy—served as a catalyst to unite the Sadducees, Pharisees and even the common people against him and the early Christians. They become one unified mob, crying out for vengeance! The Sanhedrin does what sinful man has left after rejecting the truth: they start screaming and cover their ears so they don’t have to listen anymore to his witness. What a vivid image of total and obstinate unbelief!

Unconstrained by legal formality, they waste no time in enacting their sentence. One thing of note: the council leaders were required to begin the process of executing Stephen by shoving him to the ground and casting the first stones. We could rightly characterize them as a 1st century lynch mob exacting their revenge.

Now the camera pans to and fro from mob to martyr. **“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep.”**

Stalwart to the end, Stephen prayed as Jesus had from the cross. With his last breath, he boldly confessed his faith and Christian love for his foes. His prayer—*Jesus' prayer*—is the same one we can pray as we prepare to leave this fallen world and head to heaven. Stephen knew he didn't deserve that privilege; nor had he earned it. Nor, have we or any other sinful human being for that matter. But, by the grace of God and through faith in Christ, Stephen was **"convinced that"** nothing **"in all creation,"** could **"separate"** him **"from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus"** his **"Lord"** (Rom. 8:37-39). I hope and prayer that you, and I, share Stephen's Spirit-borne conviction!

Not even the fury of his foes could deter Stephen from being a faithful witness to the end! The first known Christian martyr set the bar high for all who follow in his hallowed footsteps. Did he set the bar *too* high? When we consider his bold confession of faith in the face of death we might wonder, **"Would I display the same courage?"** Friends, the likelihood that we'll ever have to face a firing squad for our faith in Christ is pretty remote—at least in our lifetime here in America. That, despite the fact that scholars believe that there have been more Christian martyrs in the past 100 years than in all the previous nineteen centuries combined.

The more relevant question is, how can our faith endure under a constant barrage to abandon it or to "dumb down" my morality? Mountains can be reduced to rubble by massive earthquakes or violent volcanic eruptions. But they can also be eroded little by little by wind and rain. Either way, end is the same. One is cataclysmic, the other gradual. What's more difficult: confronting death for the sake of our Savior—like Stephen did—or the daily, wearing persecution we face? Both call for the same kind of steadfast confession. Do you want to bolster your resolve? Do you want to strengthen your trust in Jesus? Of course you do! So do I! So does every genuine believer!

So, here's our homework assignment for the coming week: read, mark, learn and inwardly digest (as we Lutherans like to put it!) the words the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to pen in Romans Ch. 8. If that chapter of Scripture doesn't shore up your faith, I'd be hard pressed to offer you a better alternative. As you study it, reflect on your life: the sins you've committed; the relationships you've destroyed; the opportunities you've missed to be a positive example of what it means to be a believing child of God. As you meditate on it, rejoice! For you know (as Stephen knew!) beyond a shadow of a doubt that you belong to Jesus! He accomplished your salvation! He ascended to the Father's right hand to govern all things for your eternal good! And He's given you His Word—His **"word of truth"** (John 17:17)—that He'll be with you always until He comes again. Or, until like Stephen, you **"fall asleep"** in Him and awake in heaven—your eternal home! Make your stand for Jesus every single day by all you do and say! Amen.