Is Stephen, the Martyr, a better Christian than us?

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Acts 7:55-60

The reading for today, from Acts, is really the climax and the end of the story of Stephen. His story begins way back in chapter 6. That chapter opens with Greek speaking Christians and Hebrew speaking Christians in conflict. The Greeks were frustrated that their widows were being neglected. The twelve apostles call together all the disciples and come up with a solution to elect seven Greek Christian men to be in charge of caring for the widows. Stephen is one of them. It is said that he is full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He doesn’t restrict himself to caring for the widows. He goes about preaching and arguing with other Greek speaking Jews. They find him irritating and manipulate to have him arrested. He goes before the Sanhedrin and is questioned by Caiaphas, the same man that questioned Jesus before his crucifixion.

The accusers claim that Stephen’s support of Jesus goes against Moses. When Caiaphas asks him about this Stephen gives a long answer explaining that the people of God have regularly gone against God’s prophets – from Abraham to Moses to the time of Kings David and Solomon. Then in Acts 7:52 he says, “Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers” (speaking about Jesus). This enrages the Sanhedrin.

The reading for today begins with 7:55

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 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.” 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.

My question is this: is Stephen a better Christian for having been martyred? Reading scripture, we could think yes. First of all, there are a lot of parallels between his experience and Jesus’s own death. Stephen really seems to have followed in the footsteps of the Lord. And then there are the things that Jesus said to the disciples:

John 15:20 [Jesus said] “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you”

Matthew 16: 24-25 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus warns that his followers will suffer persecution and even death. So, why aren’t we being persecuted and martyred?

For the first 300 years after Jesus walked the earth, being a Christian meant being persecuted. There are many stories from those years of people being martyred. There are also incredible stories of believers facing martyrdom and being miraculously saved. It is in stories outside the bible that we read about the martyrdoms of each of the disciples in places as far away as Russia and India. In fact, suffering persecution and martyrdom were such a big part of the practice of Christianity that when the religion became legal in the 4th century, some Christians sought out faith practices and lifestyles to make themselves suffer. This was the time of the desert monks. Their monasteries still exist and operate in the Sinai desert of Egypt. Others lived in caves and trees away from society making long fasts. They were considered the holiest of the holy. People would travel long distances to ask them spiritual questions.

Martyrs and monks were highly revered as a result of their suffering for Jesus. But, of course, there were also people that denied Christ when threatened with death. There were some that didn’t go so far as to deny Christ, but gave up scriptures and other church items to be destroyed. After the legalization of Christianity, some people – referred to as Donatists – believed that only people that suffered for Christ could be church leaders. People that were not pure and holy could not preside over sacraments or serve as bishops. One way to be pure and holy was to suffer on behalf of Christ. Because persecution by the empire had ended, Donatists, sought other ways to prove their devotion through suffering. They would instigate violent conflicts to die in holy war and some even staged communal suicides to mimic martyrdom.

Eventually, this was declared a heresy. But, the funny thing about that, is that in being declared heretical, the Donatists, were then, actually being persecuted. So, they went on for centuries as schismatic Christians outside the Catholic church. Even today there are people that seek out “suffering” for Jesus. I have had conversations with some people, who have explained that because Jesus suffered so much out of love for them, they want to suffer to show their love for him in return. I appreciate the desire to show God love, but I think seeking out suffering diminishes the work that Jesus did on the cross. He suffered, so that we don’t have to. He has already done that work – a work that could only be done by the One who is both fully human and fully divine.

So, why did he say that we would need to suffer? If we look back at the full story of Stephen, we can find an answer. Stephen didn’t seek out suffering or death. He was elected to care for widows. The thing that happens when we start to work with people that are less fortunate than ourselves, is that we start to realize injustice. In Acts 6:8 it says that Stephen was doing many great wonders and signs. He was disrupting the status quo. When he found himself in trouble with the Sanhedrin, he still didn’t back down. He tells them that in their devotion to the temple and the law, they missed God being with them. Stephen didn’t die for Jesus. He lived for Jesus and, in his case, that led to death.

When Jesus says things like “if they persecuted me, they will persecute you” we have to pair it with “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” It is a sacrifice to deny ourselves and live for Jesus. I believe that this has *little to nothing* to do with moral living. You may find this shocking, but morality is subjective and changes from culture to culture and throughout time. It is a good thing to lead a moral life, but what Jesus did, repeatedly, was to seek out the people that weren’t leading moral lives – people that weren’t strictly following the law – people like prostitutes and tax collectors. Jesus spent his time with sinners. He told stories in which Samaritans were the heroes. For us, in our context, this would be like using Muslims as the heroes in all his stories. Jesus, regularly, chastised the people with authority, who were strictly following the law for not supporting and standing up for those who were not.

Right now, in the USA of 2020, taking up our cross to follow Jesus means standing up for the people that do not have any power. That is *living* for Jesus. Jesus didn’t seek out suffering, he sought out the people who were suffering and joined them. That is what he is calling us to do. In his case, that led to crucifixion. In Stephen’s case, it led to stoning. In the case of Heather Heyer, it meant being run over by a white nationalist when she stood for People of Color in Charlottesville, VA. For most of us, living for Jesus isn’t going to mean martyrdom. But, it does take sacrifice. For many of us, it will mean being uncomfortable as we listen to the stories and experiences of non-whites, non-citizens, and non-Christians living around us. It will mean spending time with people that movies, TV, and even our friends tell us are dangerous. It also means speaking up for Jesus in those people, even when it might be embarrassing or impolite.

You at Ascension Lutheran Church have a head start on this. You are unique in the ELCA in that you are a diverse church. Many of you are already in the habit of suspending judgement on people that are different than you in order to welcome. I have learned so much from you that I will take with me to future congregations. I will be reaching out to you in the future for permission to use you as examples of loving strangers, loving the homeless, loving the differently abled. My hope for you is that you will work on the goals and use them to reach out to the neighborhood around you, so that they know you the way I do. I didn’t get to do a lot of what I would have liked in these last few months. But, I know God has been with each of us teaching us things about ourselves and the work we need to do. As our society starts to open up again, I pray that you will feel the power of the Holy Spirit prompting you to reach out into the neighborhood around the church. Connect with people that you might have feared in the past. Work for justice. Live for Jesus. I know that God will bless you for it. Amen