

## **Worth Living and Dying for**

**Acts 6:1-7:2a, 44-60**

**A Sermon by Jessica C. Gregory**

**April 30, 2017**

A couple months ago, when Michael and I were scheduling my preaching dates for this spring, I was thrilled that I got to preach on our first passage from Acts. The Acts of the Apostles is an interesting, entertaining and important New Testament book. A companion volume to Luke's gospel, it is the only Biblical book that recounts the formation of the early church. It includes the miracle movement of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate on Pentecost, when people of many different languages were able to understand one another and praise God together. It includes intimate stories describing the strong sense of community that was the early church, and the challenges that sharing all things brings.

But when I read the passage for this morning the excitement left me, and was replaced with a much heavier feeling within — almost like a rock was in the pit of my stomach.

Preaching about Stephen's stoning is not what I had in mind when I thought of Acts. But here we are. Friends, it is you and I on this cold, rainy, third week after Easter, and our Scripture for today is the incredible story of Stephen's call, ministry and stoning. A story filled with distrust, fear and anger, but also good news for us.

Time has passed since Jesus' death and resurrection. The disciples have been hard at work teaching and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. And then it happens — growing pains. After much praying and proclaiming, the church that Jesus' disciples had planted was increasing its numbers. It was happening in ways that Peter and James and John and the others had only dreamed. Among others, the Hellenists and the Hebrews felt the Spirit's movement to join in the church community.

This added diversity to the church challenges too: The Hellenists spoke Greek and the Hebrews Aramaic. Both came from distinct cultures and ways of living. And yet now they were to be part of one Body. Creating such community is hard, especially when it is large. It is not a surprise that the church, with its leadership busy proclaiming the Good News to anyone who would listen, was unable to meet all of its members' most basic needs for food.

This is the background that brings us to the calling of Stephen, a servant martyr for God. His call came out of the church's fulfilling its responsibility to care for one another. The apostles in leadership set apart seven disciples, or Jesus' followers, for the particular task of "waiting on tables." Among those called was Stephen, whom we are told was "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit."

This call to serve is part of the Good News for us today. Stephen is recognized as the church's first Deacon, a leader set apart specifically to give care to church members. It is his ministry "to wait tables" that became the foundation for our modern day leaders of the church whom

we ordain to the office of Deacon. Similar to Stephen and his cohorts, Deacons are called to minister to those who are in need — to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress, both within and beyond the community of faith. Millennia after Stephen's call, women and men, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, are leading the church in the ways of service, empathy and compassion.

Like us, the seven men were set apart in their ministry by the Jewish ritual of laying on of hands, after which these men went out to serve the Lord. Stephen, a man of charisma and deep passion we are told, "did great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). He changed people's hearts and minds and, with the Spirit's help, brought them to believe in Jesus. He served the Lord in extraordinary ways, much beyond his calling. Earlier in Acts we see this phrase often: "did wonders and signs among the people," but it is only used to describe what the apostles did — those who walked with Jesus, those who knew him, those who had been taught by him and commissioned by him. Stephen is not one of them, yet he, too, has these divine powers.

These divine powers make the rest of the community a little uneasy at first and pretty soon down-right angry. Filled with fear and perhaps envy, his fellow Hellenists spoke lies about Stephen: "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God," they cried. They got the other people, the Hebrews and other disciples, riled up too. The same people that celebrated Stephen's leadership were the ones who were tearing him down.

The Hellenists, along with those who were against Jesus — the elders and the scribes from the Roman leadership — put Stephen in front of the council of Jewish leaders and set up false witnesses to testify against him. This is a fate like the one Jesus followed: "Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward" (Matthew 26: 59-60). Though Stephen did not meet Jesus, he was experiencing betrayal just as Jesus did. This Jesus-like prophet was wrongly accused by Jewish leadership but also by Jesus' followers whom he once called friends. A man full of faith and Spirit, Stephen calmly withstood this abuse and responded to it with a speech that only made the leaders angrier at him, for in it he revealed how far from God they had become.

"A man full of faith and Spirit," this was German theologian and pacifist Dietrich Bonhoeffer. At the young age of 25 he became a pastor in Berlin in 1931, less than two years before the Nazi rise to power at the beginning of 1933. Against Nazism from the beginning, in its first days, Bonhoeffer bravely spoke against the government on a radio address and was mysteriously cut off the air mid-sentence. And so was the beginning of his life-defining ministry against the Third Reich and the leadership of Nazis in churches. He worked tirelessly for these efforts, endangering his life time and time again. An invitation from New York's Union Theological Seminary at the commencement of the war offered Bonhoeffer a safe haven, but he stayed only a month or so before returning to his German home.

He wrote to then Union professor Reinhold Niebuhr: "I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the

reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security." ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich\\_Bonhoeffer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer)) For Bonhoeffer, Christian life in Germany was worth living and dying for.

Stephen bravely proclaimed God's word and spoke against the Jews in leadership who had forgotten about their ancestors, had forgotten God. He called them an all-too-familiar name: stiff-necked people. The same name used by God to describe the Israelites in the Old Testament — people who, like those attacking Stephen, chose the ways of selfishness rather than the ways of God. Unlike the people that surrounded him, Stephen remembered his ancestors, Moses and Abraham and Joseph, and sought to live life for God, no matter what. For Stephen, God's Word and Jesus Christ were worth living and dying for. For both, death was not an end but a beginning. In his last minutes of life, Stephen remained calm and looked up to the sky to see the glory of God and Jesus. As they stoned him he cried, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And then he died.

Like Jesus, in his last moments, Stephen prayed not for himself but for those stoning him. Stephen, not God and human as Jesus was, but a mere mortal, revealed the depth of his faith through his ability to show forgiveness and mercy for that which is most unforgivable — and also most memorable.

Stephen's death began his legacy. Saul, who will become Paul, was a witness to Stephen's murder and to his martyrdom. Later in Acts during his conversation, Paul reflected on his participation and approval of Stephen's death, a horrific example of his being against Jesus: "And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him." And he witnessed the unwavering faith that Stephen demonstrated, a faith so deep, so sure, that it must be true.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had only his abiding faith with him when he was hanged. Just two weeks later, the concentration camp where he was executed was liberated by the United States. Three weeks ago today marked the 72nd year since his death on April 9, 1945 — a death which revealed yet again, the absence of God in Hitler's world; a death brought about by a young pastor's charisma and zeal for proclaiming God's word and speaking against Nazism any chance he had; a death resulting in a man's life cut too short. But he continues to influence Christians and he lives forever in his writing and his life story of an ordinary man with extraordinary faith. Bonhoeffer held onto life loosely, yet lived it out fiercely until the very end.

This weekend students at Evanston Township High School performed Jesus Christ Superstar. The show was incredibly well done, and particularly enjoyable given our recent journey through Holy Week. The show takes its liberties with those final days, but it also offers a unique perspective. Early on, in one song, Jesus sings, "To conquer death, you only have to die."

Stephen, Dietrich and Jesus all conquered death, not only because they died, but because they knew what was worth living for. Friends, for us, what is worth living and dying for?

It is an uncomfortable question. It is one that we can dismiss, acknowledging the rarity of martyrs like Stephen and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. and Oscar Romero — who are men with unique calls from God in particular times and places unlike ours today.

But is it one we should dismiss? In our lives, what is worth living and dying for? Is it our children? Is it justice? Is it our faith? Is it anything? I ask this because I think our ability to answer it could be life-changing.

Today, in our particular time and place, we are constantly distracted. We carry a distraction with us everywhere we go. According to a study last year by Network World, an average smart phone user touches their phone over 2,000 times a day. And many, many of those times we are taking in a nugget of new information. We are also overworked, putting in an average of 47 hours per week, more than any other first-world economy. And we are busy, with more activities and causes than ever. All of these realities together make it very easy for days to pass by without devoting time to those people and things most important.

The days, weeks and years go by, and the friendships become acquaintances and then become once-a-year Christmas cards. The toddlers become young adults and the newlyweds become a married couple with individual lives. The faith that grounded you and strengthened you becomes part of you in name only.

Friends, what IS worth living and dying for? Let us be intentional in our living, in our reflecting about this most basic yet most important question. And we will find that we too become filled with faith and the Spirit, motivated to move forward fully in our living, made possible only by knowing what we would die for.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was taken to the concentration camp, which happened right after a worship service, he said to a friend, “This is the end. For me the beginning of life.”

Just three Sundays ago we celebrated a new beginning made possible by the miracle of the resurrection. We are able to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection because he too was able to answer the question: What is worth living and dying for? As we journey on through this Easter Season, I invite you to commence a new beginning in your own lives as you discover that what is worth dying for makes life worth living. Thanks be to God. Amen.