

C Narrative 32, 2021
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Poulsbo
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Acts 6:1—7:2a, 44-60, 8:1a

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” ⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. ¹¹Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹²They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. ¹³They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.” ¹⁵And

all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7 Then the high priest asked him, “Are these things so?” ²And Stephen replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me...

⁴⁴“Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, ⁴⁶who found favor with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, ⁴⁹“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰Did not my hand make all these things?”

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵²Which 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. ⁵³You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

⁵⁴When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then 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. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then 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. And Saul approved of their killing him.

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The parallels between Stephen’s experience and Jesus’ passion are striking. Both preached with the Spirit’s power, and both came to be seen as a threat by the established church. Both were hauled into church court and convicted, not by trial, but by mob. Stephen’s “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” echoed Jesus’ “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” Stephen’s “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” mirrored Jesus’ “Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing.” The one divergence comes in the person looking on. At Jesus’ death, the centurion proclaimed, “Certainly this man was innocent.” At Stephen’s stoning, Saul looked on and approved of their killing him.

This mob behavior in both killings is driven not by zealousness but by fear. Stephen proclaimed, “You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” Jesus proclaimed jubilee, the casting down of the

mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. Jesus declared that the law was love and justice and service, and the church had missed the point.

“When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.”

What was the church afraid of?

Were they afraid of having their way of doing church proved wrong by Jesus and Stephen?

Were they afraid of *being* wrong?

Were they afraid of the implications of Jesus and Stephen changing the way scripture has been interpreted for centuries?

Or at their core, were they afraid of losing their livelihoods in the temple, paid for by sacrifices and temple taxes?

Or losing their power in the church?

Did it really come down (as it so often does) to money and power?

And is that really worth killing for?

Just as the parallels between Stephen's death and Jesus' are striking, so are the parallels between the church of old and the church and broader American culture of today. We resist any course correction, clinging to our interpretations and traditions.

What are we afraid of?

Are we afraid of having our way of doing church and society proved wrong by those forced to the outside?

Are we afraid of *being* wrong?

Are we afraid of the implications of changing the way scripture and constitution have been interpreted for decades?

Or at our core, are we afraid of losing the things we claim as earned, things won in a system that doesn't afford everyone an opportunity to thrive?

Or losing the power that comes with that system?

Does it really *still* come down to money and power? Even in America, even in the church?

And is that really worth killing for?

Whether it's scripture interpretation of clobber passages or one more black man killed by police, it's easy to just sit back and let it be. It's easy to just keep quiet and hope it all goes away.

And when easy won't cut it, too often we let fear take over. Instead of listening, [and] holding a hand, and giving someone a chance to vent, we draw lines and [gather people] around our perspective. (Jon McClung) We lean into our propensity to too quickly presume that we know which side God is on or to too quickly think that the only tool we have against those who disagree with us is violence. (Matt Skinner)

But in reality, even our apathy is violence. We let denigrating language be the norm:

Blaming the victim, rationalizing the behavior of an aggressor.

Mindlessly abusing another's religion: "holy cow," "spirit animal," "

Perpetuating mental or physical health stigma: stupid, dumb, retarded, lame, using blindness or deafness as a metaphor for missing the point.

Using phrases with roots in systemic and systematic racism: Long time, no see; peanut gallery; cotton-pickin'; off the reservation; gyped; grandfathered in; Our unwillingness to change even the small behaviors of our language is an act of aggression against people we have pushed to the outside, and if you want to know about the origins of these phrases and why avoid them is love for the neighbor, do an internet search of "common phrases with origins in racism."

The stoning of Stephen was the catalyst for a young man named Saul to become the foremost persecutor of the fledgling Christian church, and it took a visit from the ascended Jesus in light and physical blindness for God to change him.

We are the ones that received Jesus' law of love and justice and service, and yet we have not kept it. What is it going to take for us to change?

God is working on us; God is working in us. God is working in our rightfully unsettled neighbors to show us our sin. This story of the stoning of Stephen is not proclaimed to bring us comfort; it holds a mirror up to us in our sin. And it also shows a powerful Spirit at work in the world, calling us to act, not in violence of body or word, but in love, in healing, in welcoming, in building up. Today we are Saul, but God is changing us so that we might better reflect the Jesus of love and justice and service who is at the core of our faith. God's Spirit is powerfully at work in the world and in the church, pushing aside our fear, and drawing us into the kingdom in this world.

Amen. Let it be so.

