

“STONING OF STEPHEN.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

November 25, 2018, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Acts 7:54-60, 8:1

Prayer: Holy Father, pull back the veil and open our eyes by your Holy Spirit to see new things, fresh things, more than we could ask or imagine, more than we came expecting this morning. Give us in rich abundance all the blessing you intent for us on the Lord's Day.

Introduction.

You have heard often there are two kinds of people in the world. There are a million ways we can be divided into two camps.

Huskies and Cougars.

Ford and Chevy.

Red States and Blue States.

Coke and Pepsi.

iPhone and Android.

Those who eat the crust and those who don't.

Toilet paper over front or down the back.

Morning people and those who want to shot morning people.

Our text sets side by side a great contrast between Stephen and the Sanhedrin, a difference created by the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit, by one filled with the Spirit and those resisting the Holy Spirit.

We see those that look around and one who looks up.

Those filled with rage and one filled with peace.

Those who show no mercy and the one who prays for mercy.

Those ready to kill and one ready to die. Those who hate and one who loves.

Those who are acting according to the flesh and one who sees and says and does things the flesh never could.

When they heard these things.

Luke gives a very vivid description of the Sanhedrin's response to Stephen's defense. There are two responses for two different reasons.

Their first response is rage and grinding or gnashing of teeth, like the snarling or growling of wild animals. They are exploding with anger and livid with hate. Their jaws are clenched.

Think of a time when you were really mad. Cut off in traffic, your parents said be home by midnight, your team loses in the last minute, you wreck the car or get a ticket, someone really hurts you.

Take that time you were most angry and then multiply it by a hundred. I hope you have never been this angry.

Why are they this angry? What could possibly set them off this much? Stephen had confronted them in plain language about their sin. He did what good preaching should do, he had pricked their consciences about their sin. He pointed out how they had resisted the Holy Spirit by rebelling against God's appointed leaders, disobeyed God's Law given through Moses, persecuted the prophets and murdered the Messiah.

I don't know if you have noticed this or not, but people don't like it very much when you call them out on their sin or behavior. People don't like it when you point out some aspect of their lifestyle that is contrary to God's ways and self-destructive. People don't like it when you hold up an example of holiness and makes them feel bad or guilty or ashamed.

Instead of acknowledging the truth and repenting and turning away from that is sin or evil, they retreat further into their hard heart. And Satan is right there to stir them up into an angry frenzy. They will hate the Word of God and you for confronting them with it. Darkness wants nothing to do with the light.

Don't be like that. Even though it stings, welcome the conviction of your sin, the rebuke of a brother or sister, the admonition of a friend. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend."

I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Their first response was rage at having their sin exposed. Their second response was murder and it was at having the Savior exposed.

Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

If that is true, it means Jesus is alive, He is in heaven, He is who He said He is, He is God. They can't believe and hear such blasphemy. When Jesus said that, it got him killed.

Mark 14:61-64 The high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” 62 And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” 63 And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? 64 You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death.

If they didn't kill Stephen for saying that, they would be saying their verdict against Jesus was wrong.

Did you happen to notice something strange in the text here? Actually, it's said twice, once in verse 55 and once in 56. Something seems wrong here and you wonder if maybe Luke got his facts wrong. He says Jesus is standing.

This is unprecedented. We know from Scripture that after Jesus had suffered and died to pay for all our sins, He was resurrected and then ascended into heaven where sat down at the right hand of God. He is enthroned with all power and authority and is now the judge of all creation.

Ephesians 1:20-21 [God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion

Psalms 110:1 The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

Apostles' Creed says Jesus is seated at the right hand of God.

Why is Jesus standing? What is Jesus doing?

In a courtroom today who stands? The prosecuting and defense attorney stand before the judge who sits on bench.

It is as if Satan through his minions and emissaries has brought his charges against Stephen and accused him of blasphemy. Stephen is standing there with no defense attorney. So, Jesus comes to Stephen's defense to vindicate him in the presence of God because he was not ashamed of Jesus. As Stephen was faithfully confessing Christ before men, so now Christ is confessing Stephen before God.

Matthew 10:32-33 Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Friends, if you end up in court facing serious charges, life and death charges, and the judge stands up and comes down to defend you, I would say that is a pretty good day. And if that judge has the scars in his body of his own martyrdom, you know you have the right judge on your side and you will be vindicated.

Jesus honors faith, Jesus stands for faith, for faithful witness, for bold, courageous love for Him. There is no greater glory than to see Christ stand up for us. For those who have the Spirit, Jesus stands as an advocate, for those who don't have the Spirit, Jesus sits as a judge.

Stephen's last words.

When you are full of the Spirit of Jesus, you sound like Jesus and say things like Jesus.

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

These are amazing words given Stephen's strong and harsh words earlier, calling them stiff-necked and having uncircumcised hearts.

This shows Stephen's heart, he is strong to denounce sin and disobedience, but it is with a desire to bring them to repentance, and even as he is being stoned he prays that they may be forgiven and find forgiveness with God.

This is similar to a father's role with his children, to discipline his children with firmness when dealing with sin, but to do so in a way meant to reach the heart, to drive them to Jesus, not away.

This is why our culture doesn't understand Christians. One minute Stephen is pointing the finger at their sin and calling them stiff-necked, heartless murderers, and the next minute Stephen is praying for their forgiveness. Our culture has no category for someone speaking the truth with tender grace, for someone who calls sin sin, and then holds out repentance and mercy.

Have you ever prayed, "Lord, do not hold their sin against them"? This by the way is one way you can love your enemies. Stephen is praying for their souls, for their spiritual well-being, for their eternal future. What grace to pray for your enemies, for God's blessing on them. What power, what strength to stay above the situation, to take the high road. Do you know why you can take the high road in the face of injustice and false accusations?

I Peter 2:23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus was able to bear injustice because He trusted one who would vindicate, would deal with sin, injustice, suffering, wrong, evil. Stephen saw in heaven his vindication. The day is coming when Jesus will put all things right. You don't have to vindicate yourself or prove yourself. You can love and leave rest to God.

Do you think God ever answers that prayer? This was a defining moment in a young man's life. Saul would never forget it. Saul was saved by a prayer for mercy from a man he hated and watched die.

Implications and application.

Thus, ends the life of the first Christian martyr. Stephen died for a faith he loved more than his own life. He died for His Lord whom he loved more than his own life.

He stands at the head of a long line of martyrs for the Christian faith. All the disciples of Jesus are believed to have died a martyr's death, except John who died in exile.

There have been an estimated 70 million martyrs since Stephen. Of those estimated 70 million, 45 million were killed in the 20th century, from 1900 to 1999. (David Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD 2200*).

In our current century it is estimated that 100,000 Christians are martyred for their faith each year. That's 288 a day or one every five minutes. Twelve believers in the time we worship together here in security and comfort.

You know something that should get our attention. Why is there a church here on earth today? Why are we even here?

The church has been assaulted and attacked from day one. Why would anyone want to be a part of something that could get you killed? Why didn't people start running for the door?

Brothers and sisters, if the church was a human institution, it would have gone out of existence centuries ago. If men could have destroyed the church it would be destroyed by now.

The church is not a human institution. The church belongs to God. God will prevail, the truth will triumph. And that is one reason why the church is hated and persecuted, because it will not go away.

Be strong and courageous. Live it and teach it and pass it on.

In noticed this week on The Voice of the Martyrs' website they have a set of books called the Courageous Series that highlights the lives of biblical saints like Paul and Stephen, historical saints like Nicholas and Patrick, and others. These books give young hearts and minds an inside look at the lives of people who were dedicated to following Jesus Christ, no matter who or what stood against them. All six for only \$30. Geared toward elementary age.

In a culture full of fictional superheroes, give your children or grandchildren a Christmas gift that will ground them in the true stories of real heroes and inspire their faith and courage. Read missionary biographies.

For older kids get William Bennett's book, *The Book of Virtues*, it has a chapter on courage with a collection of poems and short stories that will help instill this virtue in our children and grandchildren. His second volume like it, *The Moral Compass*, has a chapter Standing Fast.

We are a part of a faith family against which all-out war is being waged, the majority of Christians in the world face the very real possibility of dying for their faith.

The difference maker is whether you have the Holy Spirit, or you are resisting the Holy Spirit.

If you have heard the truth and received it, if you have been convicted of your sin and repented, give thanks to God that by His Spirit He has opened your blind eyes and deaf ears, that He has brought you to repentance and grace.

Pray for the Holy Spirit to fill you with conviction of sin and courage of commitment. Depend on Him, live through him, don't do Christmas without Him. With the eyes of faith look upward and see your Savior standing for you.

Prayer: Holy Father, we know you are a God who hears the voices of the martyrs, their blood cries out to you. We know that your children are precious in your sight. Behold the persecuted church of Jesus Christ. Increase in them a sure sense of your deep love for them, increase in them faith and hope in you and fearlessness and strength in their witness about you. Grant them access to Bibles, unite them with family, raise up advocates for them, provide them and their families and especially their children what they need for each day. Comfort them in the knowledge of your love and your promise of eternal life. And inspire us by their example to be faithful and joyful in all things.

Forgive us for our lukewarmness about so great a revelation of your glory and grace. Forgive those who have sinned against us. Forgive us for harboring unforgiveness, anger, hate, bitterness, and resentment and a critical spirit. Be merciful, O God, and grant us your pardon. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who, with you and the Holy Spirit, one only God, lives and reigns forever. Amen.