

Sermon, May 10, 2020

Good morning! Welcome once again to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and Sean and Debi Beachy will join us this morning to provide Special Music. You may recognize Debi as the gifted flutophone professor and stylist from the Internet. Turns out she is also a pretty good singer. Still no word from officials on when our worship life can return to normal. Meanwhile please consider sharing our service with others if you reached it through Facebook. Our virtual Sunday School continues to be both fun and educational. Thank you Nicole, Ashley and Taylor for that. If you have children or grandchildren who want to check it out, please call the church office and we will see that you are sent the link.

The Lord be with you.

Let us pray. Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord is the way, the truth and the life. Give us grace to love one another, to follow in the way of his commandments, and to share his risen life with all the world; for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the seventh chapter.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] 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.

Here ends the reading

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the fourteenth chapter.

[Jesus said to the disciples] "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray: God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Sometimes it is hard to say goodbye. Today's gospel reading from John is part of what is often called Jesus' farewell discourse. It's a lengthy goodbye speech to his disciples delivered just before his arrest. When I first approached this text fifteen years ago, it struck me that this speech served as a sort of "Dear John" sermon from Jesus.

The term "Dear John Letter" was coined by American soldiers back during World War Two. It described the efforts of wives and girlfriends to break-up with their absent husbands or boyfriends by mail, in a way that they hoped wouldn't hurt so much.

Thousands of Dear John letters broke the hearts of American GI's in Europe and the Pacific in the 1940's. Most got over it eventually. Some didn't. Dear John letters usually tried to soften the blow; some by assuring the recipient that they were great guys who would eventually find someone else.

Others tried to ease the pain by saying the break-up was only temporary—someday they surely WILL be together again with the one they love. In today's reading, along with the next few verses we will read next week, Jesus' Dear John Sermon from the Gospel of John, does both.

By now you may have noticed that our first readings during this long season of Easter all come from the book called Acts of the Apostles. That's true every year. I should admit up front that, while it often fascinates me, Acts is not always my favorite book of the New Testament. Its literary form is unique among the books of the Bible, but not unique among early Christian literature. In fact there was a popular book called, "The Acts of Paul and Thecla" dating to the mid-to-late second century.

Thecla is described as a young, noble virgin who became an avid follower of Paul. Church fathers decided the book didn't belong in the Bible, mostly because it encouraged women to be full-fledged ministers, preaching and baptizing and the like, just like their male counterparts. That idea was a little ahead of its time. It took us ELCA Lutherans another eighteen centuries to figure that out. Meanwhile Catholics, the Orthodox, Southern Baptists, Missouri and Wisconsin Synod Lutherans and some other so-called "Evangelical" groups apparently still haven't.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla, by the way, includes a physical description of the Apostle himself. It says he was average in size. His hair was "scant." His legs were crooked and his knees stuck out, as did his eyes. The book says Paul had a big nose that was hooked at its end, and his eyebrows met. We know from Paul's own writings that he never married. Surprised?

Other early Books of Acts include the, "Acts of Peter and the Twelve, Acts of Andrew, Acts of John, Acts of Pontius Pilate and the Acts of Barnabas," to name a few.

Most of them are clearly Gnostic, with their views on the nature of Jesus nothing like ours. Some of the books are quite fanciful, and others appear to have been written by a second century wannabe author of romance novels.

All the various "Acts" purport to tell stories of early Christianity following Jesus' ascension into heaven. But Acts of the Apostles was the only Acts finally deemed authoritative and reliable enough to be included in the Bible. It is a fascinating and at times captivating account of the early years, as Christianity grew from a small cult of Jewish common folk into one of the most widespread and influential religions in the Roman Empire, and then eventually the entire world.

Critics question the historicity in some of the stories of Acts. But the author wasn't writing a history book. He was writing a story of our faith and the remarkable activity of the Holy Spirit in the early Church. Getting all the dates and names and titles exactly right wasn't, in comparison, all that important.

The down side of Acts to me is that it is arguably the most anti-Semitic book of the New Testament. The opponents of the Christians are portrayed as Jewish mobs, Jewish religious leaders and Jewish Temple authorities, not Roman officials. The author even has Peter three times accuse the so-called "Men of Israel" of putting Jesus to death.

Odd, since we know from four separate gospel accounts and even a few extra-biblical sources that Jesus was sentenced by a Roman politician and put to death by Roman soldiers. Jews didn't kill Jesus. They wouldn't have been allowed to anyway, even if they wanted to, under Roman law.

Ironically, while Acts seems especially harsh toward Jewish leaders of the day, it also stresses the importance of Christianity's Jewish roots. Acts makes it clear that the stories of Abraham, Moses and David are our stories too. Acts insists Jesus is first and foremost the Jewish Messiah, a point that Paul, the observant Jew and Pharisee-turned-Christian; you know--the hook-nosed guy with the unibrow-- didn't seem to consider all that important.

Every third year on the fifth Sunday of Easter we read from ACTS a few verses of the story of Stephen, but I think not enough of his story.

Most consider Stephen one of the most important figures in the early Church. Yet today's reading describes only his death. It doesn't even

mention his life or his groundbreaking ministry, or who exactly killed him or why. Let's fix that.

Based on what I have already told you about Acts, I bet you can guess who killed Stephen: An angry Jewish mob. And I bet you can guess why. Because among other things, he had just preached a lengthy sermon, which in the end called them murderers, who betrayed and killed Jesus, and have historically been unfaithful to God-given laws.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying this particular story didn't happen as written. But when it comes to Jews persecuting and killing Christians, any historian can tell you that throughout the last two thousand years of human history, it has almost always been the other way around.

Stephen first shows up in chapter six of the Book of Acts. He was among the first members of the diaconate or the so-called deacons, of the Church. Chapter six says they were chosen *diakonein trapezais* which literally means "to wait tables," but that doesn't mean they were like the servers down at Uno's.

Seems there was a tiff early-on between Hellenized Jewish Christians and more traditional Jewish Christians. One group worried that the Church had become too focused on its worship and evangelism committees, allowing social ministry to fall by the wayside. That happens.

What they had forgotten is something our locked-down stay-home Sunday School devotees have been taught repeatedly by Nicole, Ashley and Taylor over the last few weeks: Christianity isn't just a matter of

going to church and believing. Being faithful also involves serving God by taking care of fellow humans in need.

Seeing to the poor, the hungry; the sick—the outcast and the marginalized. No one in the patriarchal first century Near East was more neglected in society than widows and orphans, who as a rule had no support structure.

In response to the complaints Church officials appointed seven “deacons” or “servers” to see that the widows and orphans were at least fed. The most prominent of those servers was Stephen. Acts says he was full of God’s grace and the Holy Spirit and was empowered to work many wonders and signs among the people. Stephen was quite the preacher too, although his final sermon didn’t go over so well. You’ll have that.

Stephen in fact was stoned to death for that sermon, becoming what the Catholic and Orthodox Churches call Christianity’s Protomartyr, or “first martyr of the faith.” Not surprisingly today he is considered the patron saint of all martyrs, deacons, deaconesses and diaconal ministers; and since he was stoned to death, he’s ironically also the patron of stonework and stonemasons. And I find a certain morbid irony in the fact that because he was stoned to death, he is also the patron assigned to headaches. Ouch.

You can’t miss the parallels between the stoning of Stephen and the crucifixion of Jesus. Both commended their spirits to the Lord just before they died and asked forgiveness for the very people who were killing them.

Personally, I like to remember Stephen more for his life than his death. Because Stephen didn’t just model how to die for his faith, but how to

live out his faith in a challenging and difficult world. Preaching the Good News and working wonders and signs in Christ's name. Healing the sick, welcoming the stranger and feeding the hungry. Like Jesus asked in his Dear John sermon, do for others what he showed you how to do, and you'll end up doing even more for your brothers and sisters in need than even he did.

And yes, despite what the Church Fathers may have thought, that IS service for which both women and men are equally qualified. Acts says Stephen brought many outsiders into the fold. And I'm not surprised. But not so much through harsh accusations, name-calling and finger-pointing, but through his modeling of the kindness and compassion that God shows to us, and Christ commanded us to extend to others, especially society's most vulnerable.

Unfortunately that's about all we know about Stephen. Except of course that according to the popular Bohemian-turned English Christmas Carol "Good King Wenceslas" we know that his feast day is the day after Christmas. You know that song.

The legendary Wenceslas, who was really only a Duke and not a king, honored Stephen by looking out at the world around him and seeing a hungry poor man...and feeding him!

Maybe today we should honor the great Stephen, Deacon and Protomartyr, by doing the same. Because, as the end of the song—the one likely now running through your head--puts it,

"Therefore, Christian folk, be sure
Wealth or rank possessing
you who now will bless the poor,
shall yourselves find blessing." Amen.