

Sermon Series: Summer Reading
Martyr
Acts 7:54 - 8-1

by David Hockett
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I don't like this story. It's hard to read, hard to hear, hard to imagine. This one probably isn't the first place you turn when you're looking for a bedtime Bible story for your 3-year old. Noah, animals, that's a better story. This one leads to nightmares and questions, hard, difficult questions. Human beings can be so cruel, hate-filled, angry and violent, even in the name of God. By all accounts Stephen was a good, kind, faithful young man. Who would want to snuff out a life like that? And yet, there he is. The first martyr of the faith as Acts tells the story. And martyr simply means witness. Remember when we began this series, Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses." Stephen was only doing what Christ had called him to and what the Spirit had empowered him to do – bearing witness to what he had seen and heard in Jesus. And it cost him his life.

But then Jesus told us it would be like this for those who take him seriously, who commit their lives to following. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves," he said. "Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. You will be hated by all because of my name. (Matthew 10:16-22) Stephen was hated by those in authority who felt threatened by the message of Jesus. Stephen was hated, not because he was Stephen, but because of Jesus. This is what happens when you challenge authority. We saw this last week with Peter and John who were ordered to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. The religious authorities were pretty certain of how God works, of what church should be like, and their power and position depended upon them maintaining control. They were afraid. And their fear led them to see Stephen, and the followers of Jesus, as a threat. And threats must be dealt with, marginalized, silenced, one way or the other.

In a sermon written for candidates for ordination, but which can apply to any baptized servant of the gospel, Sam Wells says there is a solution to this little problem of people potentially feeling threatened and hating us because of Jesus. He says, "Keep the ministry part. That is, keep the community work, serving on committees, the ministry with children and youth, the bedside manner, the busy church calendar, the high professional standards of church, the business cards, the carefully planned budget, the classy robes, the reserved parking space, the touching anecdotes, the ready sense of humor. No one will feel threatened or hate you for those things. In fact, they'll admire you. Just leave out Jesus. That's what they hate. Got it?"

In Matthew 10, we're told quite bluntly that the reason people will hate us is on account of Jesus. So it's simple: Leave out Jesus and you'll be just fine."¹ Any number of pastors will tell you it is so very tempting to pursue a respectable religious career and avoid the gospel call.

¹ Sam Wells, "Seeing the Glory," *Faith and Leadership*. August, 2011.

We are told that Stephen was a person of good standing within the early Church, full of the Spirit and wisdom. He was faithful and was chosen by the apostles to serve. His gospel call within the Christian community was to be devoted to caring for the needs of widows and the hungry so that the apostles could then be devoted to prayer and proclaiming the gospel in the world. He's a leader and what we see here in Acts is the early Church coming to terms with how it will order its life for ministry, what kind of structure it needs to carry on the ministry of Christ. Stephen was full of grace and power and his ministry changed many lives. But, those in authority felt threatened. It wasn't so much the good works that Stephen was doing that got him into trouble, it was that he spoke and served in the name of Jesus. And so, once again, to maintain power and control and instead of leaning into the movement and work of the Spirit, the religious leaders brought false charges of blasphemy against Stephen saying that he was undermining the synagogue and the law. This leads to a sham trial complete with false witnesses and eventually to Stephen's death. It's so tragic what can happen when people feel threatened, when they believe their authority is in question, and when we let fear get the best of us. We cling to what we believe will make us safe, what will help us maintain control and secure our position and our future.

Shane Claiborne writes, "It's a good thing Jesus wasn't too worried about his safety, or he would have never left heaven. We live in a safety-obsessed society, held hostage to fear. Fear robs us of all sorts of miracles and experiences. Fear often leads to violence. But Scripture says that love casts out fear. As you read the stories of the early Christians and martyrs (like Stephen), you find that they laughed at death. They stared fear in the face without flinching. Now, this doesn't mean that they weren't ever scared. There is nothing wrong with being scared. But fear is something different. Fear is when we let being scared stop us from doing what love, or God, requires of us."²

Fear is when we let being scared stop us from doing what love requires of us.

Now we shouldn't be too hard on the religious leaders. When we read a biblical story, we try and relate to it. One of the ways we do this is by finding our place within the story, seeing ourselves as a character in the story. The truth is, as much as we might like to be Stephen, we are really the religious leaders and authorities. We are now the ones with power and control. We're the ones who now believe we know how God works and we may even believe it's our responsibility to guard and protect that tradition. Which means we should always be asking ourselves, of what are we so fearful, of what new and challenging movement of the Holy Spirit do we feel so threatened, that we are in danger of letting being sacred get in the way of our doing what love requires of us?

I heard someone once say, "All around you, people will be tiptoeing through life, just to arrive at death. But dear children, do not tiptoe. Run, hop, skip or dance, just please don't tiptoe."³ What if the decline in the Church is in part not because we have made following Jesus too hard but because we've made it too easy? Suggesting somehow that you can follow Christ without it really having any impact on your life, without it disrupting your plans, or getting in the way of

² Shane Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*. pp. 215-216.

³ Ibid.

your goals. That you can, in other words, have your life *and* on the side follow Jesus. Where did we get the idea that following Jesus will make us safe and will lead to a long and happy life? I want a long and happy life, of course. I hope everyone has a long and happy life. But is that primarily what Jesus promises? Is that what he calls us to be most concerned about? I made a passing comment a couple of weeks ago that I believe one of the reasons the Church in the West is struggling is that we love the lives we've made for ourselves more than we love Jesus. And Jesus is clear. If we love and cling to this life more than we love God, if we play it safe and tiptoe through life, we will lose our lives. But, if we risk, if we follow Stephen's example and give our lives away, perhaps not as a martyr, but if we pour ourselves out in sacrificial service to the ongoing ministry of Christ, and if we put that first, then we will have life and life abundant. But we can only do this if we don't allow fear to keep us from doing what love requires. Now I'm not suggesting that we take risks simply for the sake of being risky. That's foolishness. I am saying, and I think the witness of Stephen suggests, that following Jesus will lead us to people and places that are hard, difficult, challenging and that may threaten our popularity, or our success, our power, and perhaps even our safety. But, as one of the saints has said, "...we Christians are not called to safety, but we are promised that God will be with us when we are in danger, and there is no better place to be than in the hands of God."⁴

I love the scene in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which I've shared with you before, where he portrays a dangerous encounter with God. Lucy is about to meet Aslan, the lion, the Christ-figure, and she asks, "Is he a man?" "Aslan a man! Certainly not,' said Mr. Beaver. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea...Aslan is a lion – *the Lion, the great Lion.*'..."Then he isn't safe,' asks Lucy. 'Safe?,' said Mr. Beaver; **'Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he is good.'**

God is good. And there's no better place to be than in the hands of a good God, even when being there feels risky, makes us uncomfortable, or calls us to question what we've always known to be true about how God works. If we believe that God is safe, that God won't require very much of us, that God is like our buddy, and enjoys the things we enjoy, and likes the people we like, and approves of the things we approve, and disapproves of the things we disapprove, then we may have created God in our image. When that happens, we become like the religious authorities, we become more committed to our idea of God than we are actually obedient to God. We become fearful of anyone or anything that threatens our idea of God. And when we are afraid or feel threatened we human beings have a tendency to circle the wagons and fight for our hard-won territory, even if the Spirit is pushing us, nudging us in a different direction.

So where does this leave us? The good news is, as Stephen was reminded in his darkest hour, that we are in the hands of a God who is good. Our lives are in God's hands. And so, while there may be things that scare us, if we love God, there is nothing for us to fear. And because of that, we can risk doing what love requires of us. For our *Gathering on the Lawn* this morning I will be interviewing Leveda Law. Leveda and her husband David devoted 41 years of service in the mission field in Congo.

⁴ Ibid. p. 218.

There were many things, including lions (literal and metaphorical lions) that made serving God in Congo a risky calling. Leveda and I met the other day to talk about this morning's interview and she shared some amazing stories with me. As we've thought about the witness of Stephen and how being faithful to Christ can be risky and even at times dangerous, I'm reminded of something Leveda said to me, "The safest place to be is in God's will."

We're not all called to be martyrs like Stephen or to serve God in Congo. But we are all called. Our baptism makes us all ministers of the gospel, all are witnesses. Which means, from time to time we should stop, and pray, and consider, "what is love requiring of me?" "Where is God calling me to witness?" And trust, that wherever love takes us, God is sure to be there. Amen.