

Last week, I promoted the importance of using a lectionary to offer us a fuller measure of scripture as we make our way through the church year. And I stand by that statement. However, sometimes the lectionaries try to cover a lot of ground in one reading, and someone like Jill gets stuck with an extra long one. Thank you, Jill. In bible study on Thursday, Pat informed us that this is the longest speech found in the Acts of the Apostles. The lectionary actually left some parts out! The speech seems to have served a dual purpose. Acts is actually the sequel to Luke's gospel. Luke bore witness to the words and deeds of the apostles and even accompanied the Apostle Paul on some of his travels around the Mediterranean. Pat says this speech may have been used by Paul in his defense when he was imprisoned in Rome, which would have occurred well after Stephen's execution by stoning. The speech serves well as a testimony of how Jesus the Christ was the fulfillment of the law and prophets, even when the religious authorities couldn't see it, and vigorously, and violently, rebuffed it.

The scandal of Stephen's sermon is its indictment of the religious establishment for its inability to pay attention to and adhere to the actual word of God, rather than to their interpretation and application of the scriptures. We heard in the first part of the reading that these men of power even went so far as to grievously bear false witness by "secretly instigating some men" to spew trumped up charges against Stephen, and the other followers of Jesus. As Luke reports in Acts 6:14, they say, "for we have heard him (Stephen) say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place (the Temple) and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." The charges appear to come from a playbook used by any who wish to maintain power by appealing to people's sentimentalities so that they will not listen to the truth being spoken by a supposed opponent, or to think for themselves.

Of course faithful Jews wouldn't want to trust anyone who wished to destroy the Temple, for they had been conditioned to believe that the temple was the only place in Jerusalem where authorities on Judaism dwelled. The religious leaders had set up a nice power dynamic therein where they held the strings of the Jewish people, and through an arrangement with the Romans they could coerce the people into obeying the Rule of the occupying Empire. All of this by making the Temple a sacrosanct idol.

The problem for them was ... well ... that rabble rouser Jesus. He had been a thorn in their side for three years, and they thought they had dealt with him by having him executed. But absurd rumors were circulating that he had actually come back to life. Or, that his spirit was giving power and authority to the people who followed him and they were building small communities around the "risen Christ." The authorities then identified one of the leaders, Stephen, whose wisdom and spirit were strong, and decided to make an example out of him.

Oh, they'd give him a chance to share his story; they'd hear him out first. But then they would deal with him accordingly - maybe deport him out of Jerusalem; ship him up to Galilee. The problem was Stephen's countenance. He was calm, nonplussed, neither affected nor intimidated by their power and authority ... being put on trial. And when he spoke, he spoke with elegance and confidence ... and he pulled no punches. In fact, to their ears, what he had to say was downright offensive, a hurtful accounting of the Jewish people.

What did Stephen say that caused such an uproar? He went through the history of Yahweh's covenants with the People of Israel and pointed out all of the times when they disobeyed, ignored, and outright turned their hearts and minds away from God in order to pursue other interests or gods. He went into the history of building the temple, even though God never desired to be placed in a box - as if that were possible! And

then Stephen concluded by pointing the finger at the current Temple Administration for continuing this notorious tradition themselves by being, in Stephen's words,

“stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. 52 Which of the prophets did your ancestors *not* persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become (the Christ's) betrayers and murderers. 53 You are the ones who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” (Acts 7:51-53)

Well, that broke them. If they were originally planning on imprisoning or deporting Stephen, their mood turned even more violent. And while they badly violated the “Do not murder” commandment, they did keep a lesser statute by carrying Stephen outside of the “Holy City” to do him in. All because he told them an inconvenient truth. Their attachment to power had blinded them to the new thing God had done in Jesus, and was continuing to do with unleashing the Spirit of the resurrected Christ.

On that day, the religious leaders thought they had won. They even received the approval of a young and dangerous Jew named “Saul,” at whose feet they laid their cloaks; aka passing on the mantle of violent persecution against Jesus-followers. Saul would carry that mantle forward, persecuting and killing many followers of Jesus, until eventually being summoned by the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Saul then took on the Latin name of Paul, and became the Apostle who would carry the message of the crucified and risen Christ to the ends of the Roman world. Indeed, at the stoning of Stephen, the movement did not come to an end. God through the Holy Spirit found another inconceivable and shocking way forward.

In the powerful lyrics found in Peter Gabriel's ode to the Black South African, also named Stephen – Stephen Biko – who was killed during extreme interrogation in a

jail cell during Apartheid, “You can blow out a candle / But you can’t blow out a fire / Once the flames begin to catch / The wind will blow it higher.” In our post-resurrection, Apostolic context, the force behind the catching flames is the Holy Spirit.

It is a dangerous proposition to those who wish to hold onto something that God is working to move away from!

I once had a member of the church whose spouse died. Without his wife, he stopped coming to church. However, he would drop by the church office occasionally and talk with me about the importance of traditional Presbyterianism. He wanted to extol me about the things that he fondly remembered about the church of yesteryear, but curiously never attended a Sunday service to see what we were currently doing. He seemed certain we weren’t doing things the way they were “supposed to” be done. I could do nothing to persuade him to come be part of the existing life of the church and find out how the gospel was being lived out now.

A curious piece of his spiritual journey was that the one service he would regularly attend year after year was the Good Friday prayer service. He wouldn’t attend Easter Sunday; only Good Friday.

It was the Good Friday practice that really got me deep in thought. Good Friday is the day of death. Good Friday is the day when all hope seems lost. There’s a finality to Good Friday; that new life just isn’t possible.

I don’t want to come across as a know-it-all, but I do know that dwelling too much on the past, especially when what’s being held onto has no life, is like being stuck in a repeating loop of Good Friday observations. I hope this person eventually discovers an Easter moment that can breathe new life into their spiritual life and religious practice.

One of the messages I am gleaning from these post-resurrection stories is that we need to let go of what is tried and true, yet no longer life-giving, and work to discern where the Spirit is leading us now. Don't get me wrong, embracing change can be intimidating. During the week I heard a report on NPR about the elections happening in Australia, and how the majority of voters there are under 45. Then I heard sound bites of the current Prime Minister and his leading opponent campaigning on TikTok. It sounded, predictably, like two guys my age or older speaking in a traditional manner on a platform that is meant for quick, energetic flashes of content. It made me wonder if all those younger Australian voters had a candidate that literally spoke to them in an authentic way? It was cringably anachronistic. I shook my head, and said to myself, "Thank God I'm not a politician trying to win voters on TikTok!!" Then that voice inside my head continued, "Well, buddy, you're not a whole lot better. You've pretty much made the decision that social media is not your mode of communicating *your* professional message; and, certainly not TikTok. ... So how *do* you hope to share the gospel with younger generations?" Ouch.

And really, how different is that from the old school Jewish leaders believing that the torah studies belonged in the temple? But, if the Holy Spirit can move through the streets and houses of Jerusalem, and through the letters of a reformed persecutor turned zealous apostle, why can't they move through social media? It's an area of spreading the gospel in which I have resisted engaging. I suspect that is ONE of the reasons why the faith we feel so strongly about isn't being passed on to younger generations. It isn't the only reason, but it's something we need to be thinking about. And, we should ALWAYS notice where we are resisting what could be the work of the Holy Spirit, and probe deeper into what we may or may not be missing in our wariness.

Finding effective ways of communicating the faith can be a series of trial and error. Pat reminded us during bible study how the pandemic forced us to creatively explore how we kept active in our worship life, especially since it was risky to gather together in person. As we sought creative ways to be in physical proximity with one another, our imaginations were expanded. At LCPC, we gathered one Sunday in the parking lot, and we used a radio transmitter to broadcast the liturgy in peoples' cars on a particular frequency. That way, everyone could stay safely inside their cars, and yet still have the feeling of being together - to at least, see one another! As Pat said, "I was there. I did that. And so did many of you."

Another time, we distributed communion via Pita Chip bags and juice boxes. For those who couldn't come to worship, Colleen and I drove the elements to their houses. Did we all celebrate the Eucharist at the same time in the same place? No. But in that act we received the Supper as a community. As we learned last week, the Risen Christ can bring us together despite a distance of time and space.

Neither Faith nor LCPC resisted the Holy Spirit who urged us to keep our respective worship lives together over Zoom! The platform made for a simple solution allowing our two congregations to worship together, and keep up the momentum of our merging process. Zoom has been a gift that has lived on in Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church – every week we are grateful that the congregation is expanded by those of you who participate through "videocongregating" each week, as well as for those who have special occasions when they cannot be here in person and are able to participate via the platform.

During this Easter season, we are reminded that acts of apostles are still being performed, and the Holy Spirit empowers us, and enables us, to share the good news of the amazing grace-filled love of God through the work and witness of Jesus the Christ.

What a gift that we are able to gather and bear witness with one another of the power of the resurrected life. And, as we transition to the Table, we do so mindfully that it holds a meal of unending grace. It reminds us that even in the times when we ourselves are stiff-necked people, God will always work to loosen our minds and open our hearts so that we might not only receive the fullness of God's grace, but also bear its good news in the world! We must actively be willing to respond to God's urging.

Coming on the heels of the incredible story of Christ's Resurrection, we recognize in this meal the opportunity for Thanksgiving. We often refer to Communion as *The Eucharist*. The term "Eucharist" originates from the Greek word "*eucharistia*," which translates to "thanksgiving." This is the sacrament of thanksgiving, where bread and juice are blessed, and through the Holy Spirit they become for us the living elements of Christ; symbols of the rebirth God gave and still gives the world through Christ's life, death and resurrection.

So let us extend this table to all of our places of worship - where we gather whatever is at hand, and hallow it as the matter that speaks to God's love for us. And may this meal open our hearts to where the Holy Spirit is calling us to serve in Jesus' name. Amen.