

Sermon #1,274: Acts 6:8-8:3
7-16-17 (Trinity 5), Bethany-Princeton MN

CALLED TO BE MARTYRS - WITNESSES

Prayer: Heavenly Father, grant us grace that in our sufferings for the sake of Christ we may follow the example of St. Stephen, that we may look to Him who suffered and was crucified on our behalf and pray for those who do us wrong; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*Collect for St. Stephen's Day*)

Dear people loved by God in Christ Jesus, who not only is seated but also stands at the right hand of God, that He might uphold His children in their trials:

The word *martyr* itself does not include death. It only means "witness." When it says in John 1 that John the Baptist came "*for a witness, to bear witness to the Light,*" the word for *witness* in the New Testament is actually the Greek word *martyr*. Later it says "*this is the martyria,*" the testimony or witness, "*of John ...*"

Also when Jesus told the apostles right before His ascension, as recorded in Acts 1:8, "*you shall be My witnesses,*" He really said "My martyrs." He was not telling them they were all going to die for the faith - though all except for John did die a violent death - but to be "*witnesses.*" When Jesus said, "Follow Me," and they became His disciples, this is what He was calling them to: to be His witnesses, His martyrs.

Martyr just means *witness*. The word came to be applied to the people who died for their faith because it was the ultimate witness. They witnessed their faith to the death. We focus on the dying so much that what we can miss in their stories is their witness. They were not there to die but to witness. The point is that they didn't let the prospect or fear of a violent death keep them from witnessing.

Nowadays, what does the word "*witnessing*" say to you? Usually you think of missions. That you "*witness*" your faith to someone about Jesus. It does not strike you as dangerous. It seems like the easiest thing: "You

can tell the love of Jesus; you can say He died for all." It is so easy a child can do it; but we shouldn't think that it will not cost you anything.

A tragic characteristic of the modern Christian church is the simplistic dumbing-down of "missions" or "evangelism." It's the area in the life of the church that's been prone to the most use of gimmicks. It's irreverent, it desecrates the name of Christ and is utterly disrespectful. This idea that witnessing is easy, martyrdom is hard. We've lost the knowledge that the early church had, that martyr and witness are the same, martyrdom and missions are connected.

Hearing the story of the first martyr, Stephen, can correct this. We met him last Sunday as one of the so-called "deacons," the seven men who were "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom," who were set apart to take care of the needy in the church's work of mercy and charity. These men were not pastors but laymen.

They did not preach, but in Stephen we see that they weren't silent. From the words of the people who seized him, **"We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this [holy] place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us,"** it is obvious that he was speaking to anyone he could that the laws of Moses – the ceremonial laws – were replaced by faith in Christ, who as Son of God and Son of Man fulfilled the law in our place. These things were included in the official charge against him, so we can conclude this was his consistent message.

He was not preaching. As a Christian layman, part of the "royal priesthood" of believers, within his various vocations, wherever God put people into his path daily, he was – as 1 Peter 2:9 says – *"proclaiming the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."* He was witnessing. But as we heard, it was not without cost. This was not a sermon to a congregation. This was his answer, when questioned and put on trial for speaking his faith.

We heard his entire speech. It sure was long, wasn't it? Generally we shy away from reading the whole thing, out loud, in church. You might have been thinking: *"Abraham ... Joseph ... Moses ... David ... Don't I know all of this already?"* You might. But hearing these words shows, first, how Ste-

phen as a layman was a careful reader of his Bible. He knew it well, and his hearers acknowledged this by not contradicting his summary of the Old Testament. As he went along, however, he was showing that the temple and the laws of Moses were not central but rather the foreshadowing of Christ was central – so all this Bible History that he recounts also shows how Stephen as a layman had learned to see Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the center of the Scriptures and of his own faith.

Secondly, it is obvious that he cultivated this, he continued to be taught this and to learn it so that he did not depend on the apostles, the pastors, to be the only ones who could express this faith, but he was ready when called upon. This was something he diligently pursued and was important to him, not just when he was on the main stage, but in the quiet moments of his day-to-day life.

What all of this says to me is that reading the Bible is a dangerous thing. It is not safe. You will not be the same. It will not allow you to look at your sins and be comfortable. It will not allow you to “*pass Jesus’ cross unheeding, breathing no repentant vow*” (ELH 240:2). It will not allow you to look on another person and be OK with their remaining in the darkness of sin and unbelief. It will not allow you to be silent when God’s truth is rejected, when sin is being tolerated, approved of and promoted, when people are mistreated and when justice is not being done, when God’s name and worship are treated with irreverence, or you see someone who needs to hear the love of Jesus and that He died for all.

A Christian who reads the Bible and listens has to speak it (Ro 10:9-10). Then it will be dangerous for you. You will not meet with approval, generally. Not in our world. They will “**gnash at you with their teeth**” as Stephen found out. And “**stop their ears and run at you with one accord**” as they did to him. You’ll need an unflinching trust that the Jesus who speaks to you whenever the Bible is read is alive, and is not idle but is “**standing at the right hand of God,**” seeing you, upholding you in your trials, waiting to receive you as His witness.

How will you get this faith? Only by hearing Jesus speak to you in His Word, cultivating this, continuing in it. That is how to be a true witness.

The martyrs, beginning with Stephen, all knew they were not so strong, or so stubbornly staunch in their faith, or that they just innately had this great desire to tell about Jesus. It came from the Word, from Jesus speaking His strength into them.

So it is with you. You know how easily intimidated you are into being silent when you should speak. You know how you fail to confess your faith in word and deed, how you let the world set the agenda for you and even give in when the world wants to schedule you away from church. You know how you are perfectly well aware of the promotion of and toleration of sin, but give silent approval to it by not speaking or acting against it. You know how you take the easy way out and shrink from speaking the Gospel to someone who really needs it, because you don't want to have them turn against you and disapprove of you.

All of this should only tell you that you can't do it. You can't be Jesus' witness by your own strength. All you'll ever be able to do, on the subject of witnessing to Christ in your faith and your life, is to repent. To repent that you don't do as you should.

And that's good. That's exactly how you are a faithful witness, how you are a fulfillment of Jesus' promise that *"you shall be My witnesses,"* how you're even a martyr. The Holy Spirit leads you to do this. He makes this promise come true. He is sent by Jesus. You can be certain that you will keep this promise with the help of God. He is faithful, and He will do it. The Son of Man, Jesus your Savior, is even now standing at the right hand of God actively helping you, waiting to someday receive you to Himself, that where He is there you may be also.

So it is not being defeated to have to repent. It is a victory. When you repent, and run to Him to be forgiven then you are truly His witness. You are a witness of His grace. This is what you speak to others. Not how great you are but how great He is. This is why we uphold the truth of His Word, because only if it is true are you forgiven and saved. This is what we will not give up. Even if you should die for it, this cannot be taken away from you, and even now you join in one united voice of praise with all the saints and all the martyrs – of whom you, His witness, are one. Praised be His name forever! Amen!