

Easter 5 2008 “The Scandal of Particularity”
Acts 7:55-60 The Stoning of Stephen.

The gospel lesson for today goes well with the 1st lesson which talks about the stoning of Stephen. Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. He calls us to faithfulness and witness no matter the cost of such discipleship. Our reward is prepared for us in heaven.

Let us pray: “Oh God, you call your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrod, through perils unknown. Give us grace to go out with courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us and your love sustaining us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (LBW Matins prayer p. 137).

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (2 Cor. 1:2).

The sermon title includes the word “Scandal”. We know there are scandals in the church today. Just pick up a paper or turn on the news and you hear of another “scandal” that has “rocked” the church. The Church is no stranger to scandal. After all, our founder got himself killed on a cross – scandal! His early followers got themselves into scandalous trouble all the time. St. Paul talks about getting beaten, jailed, thrown out of town, put on trial before governors and kings. And as we heard in the first lesson, Steven, the first martyr in the Christian church got stoned. Scandal!

The early church embraced scandal and persecution, even martyrdom because they had been captured by the greatest scandal the world has ever known. It is the scandal of the resurrection. Stephen boldly proclaimed that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried and that he rose again. “**But the crowd covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him...**”

Christianity began in scandal, conflict and persecution. Jesus predicted it. You recall that, as Jesus was being taken out of the city to be crucified “**a great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. 28 But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.... 31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"** (Luke 23: 28ff.)

We should not be surprised that Christians have been persecuted down through history. John writes, **“Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.”** (I John 3:13). History is full of stories of faithful Christians who have endured hatred. Christianity is in conflict with the world even today. We don’t like to think that what we believe as Christians will set us against the world, but it does. What is the root of this animosity? How shall we respond to it?

The root of animosity is first of all a spiritual battle. St. Paul said **“For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”** (Eph. 6:12ff.) It seems the devil is intent on keeping God’s rescue mission in Jesus a secret or if that doesn’t work, then discredit Christianity in order to keep the truth of God’s scandalous love from getting out to the nations. The devil wants to keep the world in bondage to sin and death.

Secondly, animosity arises because Christianity points to Jesus only as Savior. The world doesn’t like to hear this. So the church often is persecuted because the world doesn’t want to acknowledge the scandal of particularity of God’s salvation in Christ. The text says that those who heard Stephen’s sermon about Jesus as God’s particular means of salvation, **“covered their ears, and with a loud shout rushed together against him.”** When you cover your ears you can’t hear. When you cover your ears you can’t learn anything new. When you cover your ears you block out any discussion or conversation. When you cover your ears you refuse to be challenged by a new way of thinking. When you cover your ears you are left to yourself and your prejudices, your bigotry, your idolatry. The world has covered its ears to the proclamation that Jesus is Savior and Lord. In covering its ears the world rushes to condemn those who bear witness to Christ.

What we learn from the stoning of Stephen is that Christianity is not for wimps. The saints and martyrs down through history held to their beliefs with no regard to trouble, persecution, even death. They engaged the culture around them and even when persecuted they still proclaimed Jesus as Lord. And the amazing thing is – the church grew and spread from their witness, from **“Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8). It is said **“the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”** (Tertullian - d.225A.D.)

That is because the Holy Spirit of God is poured out upon the faithful witnesses in every generation. Christianity has spread throughout the world because the Spirit of God has empowered courageous witness.

And now it is our time and our turn to take our place as witnesses of Christ. We are called to proclaim Christ crucified and risen in our generation. This witness of Jesus only is what theologians call “the scandal of particularity”. Jesus is not one of many religious options but is the unique and only way of salvation. This unrelenting witness is what has grown the church down through the ages. It is a powerful witness because the Holy Spirit empowers it.

The world is not always eager to hear this witness. We live in a culture that self-righteously declares tolerance and compassion the highest virtues even though we may not act in tolerant or compassionate ways. Now it is true that tolerance and compassion are worthy virtues in all human endeavors. No one denies that. We need to learn to get along. And Christians should never be involved in hatred of other people who hold different religious beliefs. But that does not mean that all religious options are equally valid. We should be sufficiently grounded in our Christian beliefs to be able to discuss and debate what Christianity teaches over against other religions. The religious marketplace is full of options. Some religions are virulently intolerant of others. Christians are to engage in discussion and witness in such a way that unbelievers are won to Christ by a winsome witness, not by coercion or threat.

Cultural religion is built upon cheap grace or upon our efforts to be good people. For example: cultural religion in the U.S. believes in a spiritual afterlife for everyone. But how one gets there is non-specific. If we as Christians, fall for this non-specific “spirituality” we end up being embarrassed by the specific claims of Jesus who said, **“no one comes to the Father but by me”** (Jn. 14:6). Cultural religion becomes less about convictions, and more about accommodating whatever the culture blesses. The mantra of this cheap grace is “all beliefs are personal” and “no one has the right to question what I believe.” This of course, leads to a very individualized and personalized religious expression where each individual’s spiritual experience becomes the measure of truth. All religious claims are reduced to the lowest common denominator, which says, **“Your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth.”** There is no objective standard by which spiritual claims are judged, so all religious claims become equally valid.

“All paths lead to the same place.” This cultural religion has no place for the radical particularity of Jesus, the cross and resurrection. The bold claim of Christianity is that without Jesus and the cross and resurrection all we have left is a high-minded humanism of compassion and tolerance and wishful thinking about our future destiny, a kind of “all dogs go to heaven” theology but no concrete hope.

The early Christians had the courage and conviction to point to Jesus as the Messiah, and to the incarnation, cross and resurrection as God’s rescue mission on earth. For this faithful proclamation they were persecuted. And so it has been down through history. The people of God who bear unfailing and unflinching witness to Jesus are often marginalized, ostracized, even brutalized.

Why have Christians remained faithful generation after generation? Why should we remain faithful in our time and in our witness? It is simply a matter of telling the truth as it has been revealed to us.

The truth is that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23) Christians are no better than anyone else in the world and we should not judge others.

The truth is that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16)

The truth is that your sins are forgiven in Jesus and we are commissioned to spread this good news.

The truth is that Jesus “has gone to prepare a place for you.” (John 14:2).

The truth is your true home is not this world. You belong to God who sent Jesus to die for you that you might live with God forever.

The scandalous truth is you belong to God who raises the dead and who promises that you will live again, even after death has done its worst to you. And knowing the truth it is our duty and our joy to proclaim to the world that it is through Jesus only that we are saved.

And so we pray with Stephen, who prayed in the pattern that Jesus set in his own death. We pray that those who may do us harm because of our witness to Jesus might be forgiven. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Acts 7:60). And we look with eager longing to enter our heavenly home which Jesus has gone to prepare for us. And we live today knowing that our days are in God’s hands and that his hand is leading us and his love sustaining us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.