

The main character in our story today from the book of Acts is Stephen. Stephen, as many of you know, is known far and wide as the first Christian martyr. I don't know that anyone in Stephen's day would have labeled him as such, because Christianity had not yet emerged from the cradle of Judaism. Nevertheless, that is how we know Stephen today.

Now ... In order to understand Stephen's story fully and absorb all the nuances of these verses from Chapter 7, we have to go back all the way to the beginning of Chapter 6. The chapter begins with this sentence, "Now, during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food."

Did you notice there is a whole lot of controversy packed into that one sentence? The Hellenists and the Hebrews, two sects of emerging Christianity were at odds over the distribution of resources. You might think that they were arguing over the amount of food that the Hellenist widows got, but that is not the case. In the very next verse we discover that time and talents are the resources in short supply. The *head haunchos* of the Hebrews, the twelve disciples, call a congregational meeting and remind everyone that their priority is to study and preach the word of God saying, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." It's pretty much the same thing as trying to sort out the responsibilities of the clergy versus the responsibilities of the laity. (I guess some things never change)

Anyway, the community solves the problem together by agreeing to choose seven upright men to do the task of "waiting on tables" so the twelve apostles can devote themselves to studying scripture, working out the theological part of their emergence from Judaism, preparing their sermons, and teaching small and large groups. Stephen was one of the seven chosen. So you see, Stephen wasn't one of the elite. He was a busboy for the community or at best a waiter. He certainly wasn't one of the accredited and highly respected theologians of his day.

In the next few verses we are told that Stephen, despite his lack of theological education, was “full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people,” (Acts 6:8) and spoke with wisdom and spirit in a way that the hard core academics of the synagogue of the Freedmen “could not withstand.” (Acts 6:10) In other words, what Stephen was saying didn’t exactly square up with the theology that they were used to and comfortable with. It made the old guard edgy ... edgy enough that they got the congregation of the synagogue all riled up. In fact, they were so riled up that they “confront him, seize him, and brought him before the council.” (Acts 6:12) After all, how dare this upstart Stephen, someone without a seminary degree, think that he knew better than they did about the way of God and things of the church. The witnesses even twisted his words around and accused him of trying to “destroy this place and change the customs.” (Acts 6:14) Stephen’s was, in short, accused of trying to change things ... messing with what people were used to hearing and used to doing.

The council didn’t jump right on the band wagon though. They saw something special in Stephen though, some touch of the divine. So they allowed Stephen to respond. Stephen did respond, but probably not in a way that they expected. Instead of answering their question directly Stephen called to their minds the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Moses. He reminded them that the people of Israel had rejected and rebelled against them in the same way that they were now rejecting the power and authority of Jesus Christ. He reminded them that change is hard, forward movement is hard, being literally or metaphorically in the wilderness is hard. Stephen also reminds them that God can’t be ... won’t be ... held in the confines of “house made with human hands.” (Acts 7:48) God won’t be locked up or pinned down. No institution or group within that institution can lay claim to perfect knowledge of God’s will and ways. The Holy Spirit of God is always on the move. As God says, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.” (Acts 7:49)

At that point, it appears that Stephen lost his cool a little bit. He got a little emotional and his words were pretty inflammatory. He said, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.” (Acts 7:51a)

That's the point where we pick up the story today ... the point of no return. Things have escalated. Tempers have reached the boiling point and the decision is made to silence Stephen's heretical theological and ecclesiastical proclamations forever by stoning him. If you kill the messenger you can kill the message right? And, if other messengers crop up ... well, kill them too. That's exactly what the religious old guard tried to do. The group of people emerging out of Judaism, those who would later be known as Christians, were hunted down and dragged off to prison by a right wing religious conservative named Saul.

The funny thing is though, when the Holy Spirit of God is on the move nothing can stop it. You can't pin it down. You can't control it you can't hold it back. God's will always makes a way through even the most violent resistance to change. Take example ... that young man Saul. Of all the people in the world, God chose the persecuting, raging, ravaging Saul to bring the message of Christ Jesus and the way of Christ Jesus to the Gentile world. God took Saul, a man whose feet were rooted firmly in centuries of tradition, and turned him into Paul, the greatest missionary of all time. Instead of being a force of inertia, Paul became an agent of change and one of the founders of the re-formation of Judaism into Christianity. In fact, Paul helped catalyze not one but two reformations because Paul's letter to the Romans sparked a fire in Martin Luther that ignited the theological imaginations of all of Europe.

This year we celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the re-formation of Catholicism. In that re-formation Protestantism emerged from Catholicism. In the midst of that 500th year celebration, let's not forget that it was a messy and difficult time. It was a time when some people resisted change and others welcomed it. It was a time when people were at their very best and people were at their very worst. Let's not forget also that there were cultural, political and economic factors as well as religious factors in the Great Protestant Reformation ... and that it wasn't just Catholic religious conservatives against Protestant religious liberals. It was also poor peasants against wealthy aristocracy. Let's remember that in what is known as The Peasant Wars of 1524 and 1525 up to 100,000 of 300,000 armed peasants died in the German speaking areas of

Europe. And, let's not, repeat that mistake and come to literally or metaphorical blows in our country or in our congregation.

Our religious life never takes place in a vacuum. It didn't in Jesus day. It didn't in Stephen's day. It didn't in Martin Luther's day and it doesn't now. The Holy Spirit of God is always at work in the world around us. And, the Spirit of God does not rest. Sometimes it blows like a gentle breeze creating calm and a sense of stability; sometimes it blows with gale force winds bringing change and making us anxious and uncertain. In one day and age the assembled people of God may change the world; in another day and age the world may change the assembly. Most often though, it seems to me, that the two are intertwined and God is at work in the background changing everything.

We are, right now, in the early stages of one of those times of uncertainty and change. We are in the midst of a cultural shift. We are in the early stages of a religious reformation. They seem to happen about every 500 years so we are right on schedule. There will be lots of things to discuss, lots of things to turn over in our heads and hearts, lots of things that used to work that just aren't working anymore. And, there will be differences of opinion about how to handle all the change that is now upon us. As we embark upon this journey through the sea of change, let's be sure that we are constantly sensitive to the winds of the Spirit blowing around us. Let's be spiritually and theologically discerning - setting our sails, as best we can, in the way that catches that wind just right and sends us straightway in the direction God wants us to go. And, let's remember the example of Stephen who – when hounded and wounded by his own people – saw God in the mix, walked in the way of Jesus, remained calm, and practiced forgiveness.

And, yes, I know that it didn't end all that well for Stephen. But, when Stephen went down he went down faithfully and is remember for that to this very day. That counts for something don't you think?

✠AMEN✠