

Stephen's Witness
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Acts 6:8-15, 7:54-60

In the early days of the Christian community, as the Gospel message was taking root, there were both Jews and Greeks in Jerusalem who wanted to follow Jesus. But they didn't agree on some important matters.

Yep, sounds just like church to me!

According to the Book of Acts, there were many more Hebrews than Hellenists (aka, Greeks), so the Hellenists (who were from "away") complained that the Jews were only looking after the needs of their own when it was time to distribute food, clothing and shelter to those in need among them.

The complaint was that the Greek minority's elderly and widowed were getting passed over.

In typical church fashion, the Jewish Christians said to the Greek Christians something like *"we're too busy with spiritual matters of our own! Appoint some of your own people to distribute the support to the widows and orphans, so you can be sure it's fair. Form a committee; if you really need to get it done!"*

Stephen was one of seven Greek-speaking followers of Christ who was called at that time to address the conflict. He and the others he served with were commonly known as *diakonia* which, in Greek simply means "servants" (this is where we get the term deacons today).

Stephen was chosen for this important leadership position because the others recognized that he was a good debater on many issues of faith. Stephen was really great at persuading people to follow Jesus, and the church was growing. Here was someone who practiced what he was preaching, always standing up for those in need, refusing to be silent. In a debate, no one could beat him.

As Stephen grew in popularity, some in the movement schemed to silence him... take him down a notch. They recruited false witnesses and arrested Stephen for blasphemy against Moses and God. They took him before the Temple Court, where the high priest served as judge and jury. When he asked Stephen *"are these things so?"* he eloquently responded with a

passionate narrative of God's mighty deeds and reviewed the history of the people from God's call to Abraham right up to the building of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.¹

At the end of his speech, Stephen boldly declared: *"but the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands... You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not prosecute?"*

And with that, the angry crowd turned on him, proving his point. They dragged him from the city outside and stoned him until he died. The year was 33 AD, and Stephen's death began another wave of persecutions as Rome sought to quiet this movement, this revolution.

A few centuries later, Stephen was one of the first to be canonized a Saint in the Roman Catholic tradition; today he is recognized as the patron saint of deacons, horses, stone masons and casket builders. And with an almost humorous twist, he is also the saint to whom you pray for headache relief – a common problem when you've been stoned... or so, I'm told.

Stephen the Martyr... just one of the countless people who have been martyred for their faith, who suffered for what they believe. The word "martyr" is Greek, meaning "witness;"

We can think of others in history who held their convictions with such determination:

- Joan of Arc, executed in 1431, was a martyr for the freedom of France;
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945, was a martyr for justice;
- Martin Luther King, assassinated in 1968, was a martyr for civil rights for all;

Each held their Christian convictions above their own personal security and even life itself.

Stephen's leadership stirred up the people and lit a fire in their hearts.

That passion was certainly a gift from God, but it was also a threat to the established and entrenched powers of the establishment.

¹ Acts 7:1-47

Faith changes lives and we can be changed when we witness someone else's strong faith. On that day outside Jerusalem, there was a young man who stood at the edge of the crowd and held the cloaks of the men who were casting the stones.

His name was Saul and he was there because he thoroughly approved of the penalty imposed on young Stephen for his blasphemy. He became a ruthless persecutor of Jesus's first followers.

But years later, the same man – now the Christian apostle named Paul – was in prison for his faith. There he looked back over his ministry and surely recalled the day he stood as a silent witness when Stephen was stoned. And that example of faith was surely part of what opened him to the movement of God's spirit.

Most of us will never be taken to task for our faith. We'll never face an angry mob. We'll quietly go about our business, and do our best to try to treat people with respect and kindness.

But Stephen's story prompts me to ask: if someone encounters you or me, will they know that we follow Christ? That we're not just being nice or neighborly and kind but that we're being disciples?

What you believe matters. Being able to articulate God's work in your life is part of a mature faith.

But much more important than what you believe is what you do with it... how you live... how you witness... how you embody the faith you claim. The way you tell what a person really believes is the way that person acts. What you do, how you treat other people, what you value – these are the true indicators of your faith.

They killed Stephen. They had to find some way to silence the voices cut them to the heart, that make them face the truth, that exposed their own flaws and call them to repent and to let go and to listen to God. So they tried to silence him, just like they tried to silence Jesus. But we know what happened when they tried to silence Jesus!

Will we be silent? Or will we explore together the frontiers of faith in Jesus? Or will we be caretakers of fading memories? Will we be a nice, friendly, quite harmless church? Or will we speak the truth in love, exposing the flaws of a world not yet just, calling all to repent and to let go and to listen to the God who is still speaking? Amen.