

**May 3, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church - 5th Sunday of Easter**

**Rev. Elizabeth Molitors**

***But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout  
all rushed together against him.***

***Acts 7:57***

“May we who have gathered  
to share a preached word  
from these ancient words  
encounter a living word. Amen.”

*(from Wilda Gafney)*

If you were in church last week, you heard, in the first reading from the book of Acts, a description of the communal life of the earliest followers of Jesus, after his death and resurrection. The scripture says that many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles, everyone was living together, and sharing all their possessions and food, with things being distributed to people based upon their needs. Everyone included, no one left out.

That sounds great, doesn't it? Glorious. Ideal.

And then today we hear, from the same book of Acts, that some people rose up against a man named Stephen, dragged him out of town, and stoned him to death.

Idyllic community life in chapter 2; execution by stoning in chapter 7. What has happened in the intervening 5 chapters?

The book of Acts is one of those biblical books whose rich stories we don't too often hear, except in this time we're in now - Eastertide - and then again on Pentecost Sunday. Acts was written, scholars believe, by the same person who authored the Gospel of Luke, and it picks up where Luke's gospel leaves off. It's Luke's "sequel," the second act, if you will. The gospel of Luke ends with stories from the day of Jesus' resurrection, and then Acts takes over, telling about how Jesus' followers organized themselves and worked to carry on his ministry.

Here's a quick recap of the chapters we skipped over from last week to this week...

Chapter 2 begins with the story of Pentecost, with the disciples being sent out into the world, and, as we heard last week, creating communities which seem to be early church utopia.

In chapters 3 and 4, there are stories about Peter and John preaching and healing, and then getting arrested by the religious authorities, the governing council called the Sanhedrin, who are

in league with the Roman occupiers. This cycle doesn't just happen once, but repeatedly.

In chapter 5 is a story that, sadly, we *never* hear in our regular Sunday lectionary cycle, about some internal turmoil in the followers-of-Jesus community. It's the story of Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple, who sell a piece of their property, and then turn over the proceeds of the sale to the group....except not *all* of the proceeds. They're not particularly up front about their deceit, and they "fall dead," as a result (although it's not clear whether God strikes them down or they die out of shock or shame at being caught in a lie.) Later in chapter 5, we hear more about the apostles preaching and healing, their subsequent arrests, beatings, and persecution.

In chapter 6, the scripture says, a dispute arises over the neglect of Greek-speaking widows in the daily food distribution in the community, and so a new role — deacons — is created, and 7 people, including Stephen, are appointed to oversee this ministry. Stephen apparently does great work, but then, in the passage we heard this morning, he's targeted by a mob and stoned to death.

So, was Stephen murdered because the mob didn't like the idea that he was taking good care of widows and giving them

food? Sort of, but not exactly. Stephen can be thought of as kind of a scapegoat, someone who's being made an example of by the powers and principalities that see him and other Jesus-followers as a destabilizing force, a threat.

Throughout the first 7 chapters of the book of Acts, what is articulated, over and over, is that as Peter and John and Stephen and all the rest, as they do their work of tending to the needs of the sick and the widows, as they preach the message they learned from Jesus — of God's desire for all of humanity to flourish in a just, equitable, and peaceful world — and as they organize their communal life based on those principles, well, that draws a massive following. Turns out that a lot of people like the idea of peace, equity, and justice. They like food, too, and healthcare, and a system of community leadership that takes everyone's needs and voices into account.

But these aren't the folks who go after Stephen, these aren't the people who are arresting and beating Peter and John as they preach and heal — that work is being done by (or orchestrated by) the Sanhedrin, the religious governing body. The Sanhedrin's religious, political, and social authority (and, I imagine, there's a financial component there somewhere) is being undermined by the popularity of this Jesus movement.

The Roman Empire depends on the Sanhedrin to maintain order amongst the Jewish people, and a large populist movement which has, as its icon, the recently-executed Jesus is the kind of thing that could provoke a crackdown by the Romans, and if that happened, the Sanhedrin would likely find themselves no longer in power.

(If you're getting a sense that the issues of first century Jerusalem bear a striking resemblance to now, you're not wrong. Then and now: power, wealth, authority. Who has it, who keeps it, what threatens it.)

But history repeating itself is not the only thing that jumped out at me as I read today's passage from Acts. I want to go back to what I said at the beginning, about how we usually only hear little disparate bits of the story arc in Acts, and how there's a cost to that, to only hearing part of the story.

In preparing for today's sermon, I read, as we preachers often do, various commentaries about the stoning of Stephen. Most of what I read was about Stephen's faith, his forgiveness of his enemies, how like Jesus he was as he faced his death. When we hear these 5 verses, we're moved to admire Stephen, or be in awe

of him — and he is to be admired, absolutely! But in hearing only this bit of a much larger story, we end up with a narrative that centers the virtue, resilience, and suffering of Stephen, while diffusing, obscuring or sidestepping the responsibility of the perpetrators, and the oppressive system in which they operate. As a consequence, unjust systems can remain unchallenged, focus is shifted away from stopping harm, and victims are burdened with being virtuous examples rather than people who were wronged.

If in reading this brief passage we've missed the bigger picture of the structures and systems that led to Stephen's death, that's not Stephen's fault, nor is it the fault of the book of Acts — it's simply a byproduct of the way a narrative is presented.

And that's what really jumped out at me, the effect of the way stories are told. The perhaps unintended consequence of focusing on one part of a story, to the exclusion of another.

When I thought about this little slice of Acts, and how Stephen is presented as this kind of virtuous hero figure, it made me think about the stories that circulate after school shootings, of heroic teachers throwing their bodies over their students to protect them, risking or giving up their lives to save a child. Heroism and self-sacrifice are absolutely virtues to admire and

emulate, but does our focus on heroism draw our attention away from the underlying problem of why our culture is so enamored with guns and violence, and who is it that is benefiting from that obsession?

I thought about the posts I see on social media, where successful GoFundMe campaigns are celebrated for the money they've raised to help someone pay for their cancer treatments. But then I wonder if the excitement and gratitude about peoples' generosity — again, something to be admired — but does that distract us from asking the question of why we endure a healthcare system that bankrupts so many, and who's benefiting from this injustice?

I thought about the U.S. women's Olympic hockey team, and the praise that was heaped on team captain Hillary Knight for how "poised" she was in response to all the misogynist, political nonsense that followed the team's gold medal win. I found it refreshing, in one press conference I watched, to hear Ms. Knight identify and call out what was happening. She and her teammates and the media should have been talking about the team's winning strategies and training and athleticism, but instead, when the narrative was all about the captain's strength and virtue, it

distracted from the systemic garbage that caused her to have to be poised and strong in the first place.

And there are so many other examples...

We admire how people endure what shouldn't be happening, instead of pressing for answers about why it's happening at all. Which seems to be what's happening in this bit of the book of Acts, presented as a stand-alone story. Stephen is courageous, faithful, forgiving. But if the story ends with 'Look how well he died,' then we've missed something.

I thought about that trope, a kind of parable, which tells of a group of picnickers at the edge of a river, enjoying their lunch, when suddenly they see people come floating by on the water, yelling for help. They exhaust themselves hauling out the half-drowned victims, with more coming all the time, until one of them has the idea to go upstream, to find out why folks are falling in.

Yes, by all means, let's give thanks and praise for those who go to extraordinary lengths to rescue those in the metaphorical river, but let's not let those resilience narratives get in the way of figuring out the source of the problem upstream.

Jesus was an upstream guy. Yes, he hauled people out of the river, but he was also and always about examining, poking at, and critiquing the systems that let people fall in in the first place.

As followers of Jesus, that's our job, too. We're called to be witnesses and story tellers, carrying forth the *full* story of what we see going on in our world. We're called to be people of curiosity and questions, poking at structures and systems and asking why? and who benefits? whose voice isn't being heard, who isn't being represented, and who is being scapegoated?

We're called to be upstream people, focused on creating a world of justice, equity, and peace which makes it possible for all to receive what God desires for us, according to our needs. Everyone included, no one left out. *Amen.*