

## **Acts 6:1-7:2a, 44-60**

The Acts of the Apostles was assumed to be a straightforward, historical accounting of the earliest days of the church. It recorded the who, what, when, where, and why of the early church. How, then, does this story about antiquity and its events influence us today? This account has been regarded as the record of the church as it should be. There is an impulse to go back to the church as it was in its earliest days. A theological nostalgia guides our reading: if only we could do church the way it used to be done, we would be in a much better place.

Our reading seems to shatter this concept. **First**, we read about a church divided along linguistic and cultural lines, a church that cannot live into the promise of a community where “there was not a needy person among them.” **Second**, we see church leaders too busy to deal with the distribution of food to the widows. **Third**, we read about the demise of Stephen, a martyrdom that seems to precipitate anew the church’s journey to be witness even “to the ends of the earth.”

In short, this is a church that is contentious, overwhelmed, and confronting great loss. Perhaps what we learn in Acts is to not look for a blueprint for an ideal church, but instead to develop an imagination for what God does when God draws our lives together into communities characterized by unity and division, focus and uncertainty, joy and loss.

First, an explosive event challenges the utopian early church. Acts narrates a church in which all are fed and cared for out of the abundant selflessness of the members of this early community. Yet, this utopian ideal finds itself directly under threat. A dispute

emerges between the Hellenists and the Hebrews.

The presenting problem was a complaint by the Hellenists against the Hebrews that their widows were being neglected in the daily welfare distribution. The Hellenists are Jews whose first or main language is Greek. They had been among the very large numbers of Jews who had lived and been brought up in areas of the world where Greek was the main spoken language and that included most of the then known world accessible to Jews – including parts of Palestine itself. The Hebrews here are Jews whose first language was Aramaic, the main language spoken in Judea and Galilee. They were all Jews, but obviously different languages keep people apart, even though there will have been a number who were proficient in both. There would have been two communities, two kinds of worship, and a whole host of other social and community activities catering to the separate language groups. That makes for a complex situation, not unlike our Lutheran churches expressing different cultural customs in a variety of languages.

The living together of two languages, and two culture groups was a complex issue. These were really migrant people returned to enjoy the benefits of “our land where we have always lived and worked.” They are Jews but they have strange ways, even dangerous ways. We know. We have heard of people’s sons going off into far-away countries and squandering their living. For Judeans, the Galileans were bad enough. They spoke in a funny way. These others spoke Greek. They were worldly, open to foreign influences, and probably had secret practices that if only you knew would shock you deeply.

Or, from the other side of the fence, many who returned did so precisely because of a very deep religious faith. Away from their homeland they had developed strict conservative religious practices and returned home to find the big commercial enterprise of the temple, wealthy high priests, all onside with the country's millionaires, bending the divine Law. The tensions of multicultural Judaism in Jerusalem were very great and many of them must have been equally present among the first Christian communities.

So, we see a cultural and linguistic divide emerge. We can easily imagine how such disagreements and misunderstandings can lead to a community losing its way. This is not the idyllic community that the first churches were imagined to be.

And who were the widows? Jerusalem was the holy city. Many who had lived most of their lives away from Judea in places like Egypt, Rome, Asia Minor, Greece, Syria, returned home in their later years to Jerusalem so that they would die in the holy land. The structure of the society dictated that women were dependent. Men had power. Men had money. Women were safe and secure if married. But widowed, they were exposed to dangers of exploitation and often lived in poverty dependent upon the mercy of those who obeyed the scriptural exhortation to remember the widows and orphans. There was relief, even daily welfare distributions, but it was relief within the framework of an unequal and unjust society.

The underlying injustice was so much part of social life that it was invisible. Slavery and the position of women went unnoticed. It is always hard to see the things that are most visible. Despite the catch cry that in Christ there is neither male nor female slave nor free, it has taken 1800 years to face at least the crassest forms of slavery, and we are still

in the process of understanding the revolution of the gospel in relation to women in society.

Luke doesn't tell us who was in the wrong in the Christian communities, whether the problem was a misunderstanding, an administrative bungle, a slip of unwitting prejudice, a blatant piece of discrimination, racism or sexism. Luke's economy of words speaks of an immediate response by the young Church's leaders. We notice that the apostles take the issue seriously.

Although they are busy preaching, they stop and they listen. The problem is not swept under the rug; it was, potentially, explosive. So in response to the problem, the twelve call for seven deacons whose call would be to ensure equal distribution of the food and sharing the ministry with the whole community. They address the Greek-speaking community and tell them to choose leaders for themselves, giving the initiative and responsibility to those who have the problem.

Too busy with proclaiming the word of God, the twelve contend that someone else must step in to take care of this table ministry. The seven men who are chosen, based on names and origins suggest that they may be drawn from the Hellenists in the community. The part of the community treated unjustly is called to lead. The job description is: wait on tables, a vital task in a community of need, but not at all surprising. Remember that Jesus told them that he came to serve, not to be served.

This brings an unexpected result. We hear about one of these seven deacons, not about his waiting on tables but about Stephen doing "great wonders and signs among the

people." This was not in the job description the church gave Stephen! But as we well know, sometimes the church gives us a particular job description, but often times God has a wider sense of our call.

Stephen's preaching and wonder-making instigates controversy and eventually conspiracy. In a scene reminiscent of the story of Jesus' life: false testimony is procured, and Stephen is brought before the high priest. Yet Stephen continues proclaiming the gospel.

Stephen returns to Israel's history noting that God had always sojourned with Israel whether in "the tent of testimony in the wilderness" or the "house" Solomon built for God. But, Stephen notes, "... the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands." In some ways, this is not uncontroversial. God cannot be constrained to a time and place we create. And yet this could sound like a stunning rejection of the temple's importance. But there is more! Stephen then echoes prophetic denunciations of long ago to condemn those who killed the prophets who foresaw the Righteous One as well as the Righteous One himself!

In his speech, the Lukan Stephen draws on Israel's Scriptures and Story for both positive and negative examples in order to refute the charges that the Christian "Way" represents a radical departure from the worship of and covenant with Israel's God. Stephen needed to supply a competing version of the story that was coherent and compelling.

In Stephen's version of Israel's history, there are two Jewish groups: those who

accept God's message and messengers and those who reject them. The comparison Stephen develops aligns Stephen and the church with Abraham, Joseph, the prophets, and Jesus. His opponents are aligned with the Egyptians, Joseph's brothers, the rebellious in the wilderness who disobeyed Moses, and the ancestors who killed the prophets. For Luke, rather than rejecting God's house or God's law, the followers of the Way are in line with the faithful in Jewish history who have sought to keep covenant with God.

Such daring leads to Stephen's stoning. The fact that in our twenty-first century world execution by stoning is still practised is a living reminder of the monstrous cruelty that such an act represents. To hurl rocks at a living human being, slowly stripping off pieces of flesh, crushing bones in legs, arms, and face, creating wounds in too many places to number, suggests a torture whose horror is beyond anything we can conceive. The sheer intimacy of the deed, its slice-by-slice decimation of a living body, the sound of stone hitting flesh — surely no person with any shred of humanity could participate in such a ritual murder.

But of course human beings did — and do — just that. Leviticus describes stoning as the only appropriate punishment for blasphemy. The Hebrew Bible is riddled with the ritual of stoning for any number of crimes, from being a wizard to being caught as a thief. And in our own time, women have suffered the fate of stoning in cultures that abhor sexual relationships that transcend some established norm. When the Taliban held sway over large parts of Afghanistan, they often used the fear of stoning to keep women, especially, in line with their rigid views of the world. Stoning is an obscene way to die,

staining with blood the victim and staining with shame those who hurl the stones.

The Jews stone Stephen to death. They refuse to hear his sermon that has been directed toward them and their murder of the Messiah Jesus. Not only does he pin the murder of Jesus squarely on their shoulders, but he claims that this latest murder of an anointed prophet is merely another in a long line of "murders," not always physical ones but always assaults against the Holy Spirit. In fact, Jewish history, according to Stephen, may be summed up in this appalling phrase: "You stiff-necked people (Stephen here aligns the ancestors of Israel with the pharaohs of Egypt, those monarchs who enslaved them for centuries), uncircumcised in heart and ears (using their own distinctive physical ritual against them), you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers." The murder of Jesus was nothing more than another example of the monstrosity of these Jews who can do nothing but kill those who have come to challenge and finally to save them.

Little wonder that the Jewish audience of this disgusting diatribe refuse to listen to such twaddle, stopping their ears in rage, and rushing to shut Stephen's mouth. Why should they listen to such a one-sided, cruel, and bigoted assessment of their own history? Are there not other ways to read the history of Israel? Are there not other explanations of why Jesus dies on the cross beyond a massive indictment of the Jews?

Stephen is redoing what Jesus has done already in his passion in the gospel. He works signs and wonders among the people; he disputes those who challenge him; he

is arrested; he is brought to trial before the Sanhedrin; he is taken outside of the city for execution; he prays that his spirit may be received; he asks forgiveness for his murderers; he is buried by pious people. The major difference between the passion and death of Jesus and that of Stephen is that Jesus is silent in the face of his accusers while Stephen offers his long and angry sermon diatribe against those who kill him. Yet even as he dies, he resembles Jesus on the cross as he proclaims forgiveness over his persecutors.

And there is one more dramatic intrusion into this narrative: Saul is standing there. This is the first time we encounter him in Acts, a less than auspicious introduction as he approves of Stephen's killing, and perhaps even takes part himself. Acts narrates the church at its best and its worst, at its heights and its depths. Thus, we don't have a blueprint for an ideal church in Acts, but rather a complex narrative that invites our imagination.

The biblical traditions about Easter and its proclamation are not all about victory, wonder, and rejoicing. Stephen's story constructs a grim memorial to remind us that the stakes are high. Jesus may be Lord, but he will still be resisted. His resurrection does not stop the human race – including religious people – from spilling blood and resisting the prophetic remonstrations of God's spokespersons.

No one pages through the New Testament without repeatedly reading about violent resistance. The story of Stephen gives us much to consider, lest we forget the atrocities that are part of the Christian legacy – those inflicted upon people of faith, as well as those inflicted by them. Consider the portrayal of Stephen.

Certainly Acts presents Stephen as the prototypical martyr – not a rogue proclaimer of the gospel but an agent of God, guided by the Holy Spirit. His vision of the resurrected and exalted Christ confirms a key point of his sermon – that God is not confined to a particular place. It also makes certain that Stephen himself will be vindicated, because Jesus is. Finally, in an exemplary way Stephen shows forth Christ through the grace he exhibits, both praying for his killers as Jesus did and likewise dying faithfully.

But if we dwell too intently on images of a smiley Stephen, all pious and cherub-like, we risk passing over the ugliness of a crowd crushing a man's skull, one hurled rock at a time. If we make this passage only about Stephen, we might neglect to notice the stones littering the ground around us, which either implicate us or cause us to cry out for deliverance from cycles of violence.

The people who kill Stephen are neither the local hooligans nor the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus to a cross. They are, seemingly at least, upstanding members of religious communities: regular members of synagogues, elders, religious professionals, priests. They are guardians of vital traditions. They are important people who possess a lot of leverage in religious discourse; and political discourse.

But why do these people go to such an extreme? Are they just terrible people? True, he issues some pointed accusations, and he challenges the theological basis for the centrality of the Jerusalem temple. But where did they ever get the idea that stoning was a justified response to anything?

This is hardly the only stoning that scripture describes, and like the others it issues

a stark reminder of the potential for violence in religiously-influenced conflict. It's the kind of violence that the Bible does not allow us to disown, entirely. We cannot make this or other texts say: "Old Testament, temples, law, violence: bad. New Testament, Jesus, grace, gentleness: good."

We are left to ask hard questions about a church history and a contemporary society replete with oppression and violence. How do these terrible inclinations of human society connect to a story about a cross and empty tomb? Does the Easter message, as we retell and reenact it, merely give us one more example of humanity's propensity for violence? Does Easter give a warrant to hope for an end to bloodshed, or does it reiterate that faithfulness to the gospel will only provoke more of the same? There are stories around us that demonstrate humanity's reliance on violence to protect our fears and ignorance. There are stories of violence as the hopeless expressions of a shattered soul: shootings in schools and workplaces; air strikes and years of killings in Syria; a Republican student with a machete attacking a Democratic student; the live streaming of killings on social media. There are stories that illustrate violence's effectiveness as ruling powers' defence against the radical claims of the gospel.

Then there are the traditions, rights, and prerogatives – religious, political, economic, and social – that we insist on maintaining, even if they require us to eliminate someone in the process. If the Easter story means anything, it had better mean that God promises an end to this way of doing business. And that God can save us from ourselves.

Stephen and the Hellenists called into question a way of handling scripture and tradition which appeared strict and devout, but denied ultimately the central concerns of

the scripture. These strict devout people kept it to the letter at one level. They were the original fundamentalists and some of them, like Paul, were probably as fanatical as some forms of Islamic and Christian fundamentalism we know today. They kept the Law, the scripture, but at a deeper level they failed to keep it. They failed to grasp the heart of scripture. They were so bound to literal obedience to its words, that they failed to obey its Word. They clung to the familiar and the manageable. They were like those of whom Jesus said, They traverse sea and land to make a single convert, they make much of tithing, they adorn the tombs of the prophets, but they have neglected the weightier matters of the Law: justice and mercy and faith.

Amen.