

Stoning the Messenger
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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Acts 7:55-60

It's a well-known principle of physics that for every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction. In other words, actions, and speech, have consequences, just in the same way as, say, pushing a glass off a table will make it hit the floor with That is neatly, and tragically, illustrated for us this morning in the stoning of Stephen. Though he is not the first person to be silenced for speaking uncomfortable truth(s) to power He becomes the first to die as a result of his witness to the gospel. The way the writer of Acts spins it, it is just that neat and tidy. However, its impact has continued to be felt, from the time of the earliest persecutions of Christians up until the modern day.

So who was Stephen, and how did his life come to this horrific end?

Acts 6 tells us Stephen was among a group of "seven young men, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." The apostles chose them

specifically for the job of distributing food to the poor and looking after widows. Of the seven, Stephen was particularly gifted and wise. He was not always so well-received by the people he served, particularly when he told them things they did not want to hear. In a manner eerily similar to how some of the Jewish authorities conspired to arrest Jesus, they trump up charges against Stephen and put him on trial. He turns right around and indicts them in return: "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 persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.' When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen" (Acts 7:51-54, NRSV).

Oops. And we know what happens next: they take him outside the city and kill him, but not before he, like Jesus, asks God to forgive them.

Stephen's importance lies not in his death but in his life of service. And, in how that life of service, to Christ and Christ's people, comes at a high cost. His story "... constructs a grim memorial to remind us that... 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 spokespeople."¹ It's nothing new for well-meaning people to attack truth-tellers in their midst. It happened to several of the prophets, most notably Jeremiah, who described spending a night in the stocks on account of his loud mouth, and to Jesus himself. Stephen's killers are otherwise upstanding citizens who, no doubt, thought they were perfectly justified in removing the threat that they believed Stephen posed

¹ Matt Skinner, "Commentary on Acts 7:55-60." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-Sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-755-60> [accessed May 1, 2023].

to them. They think their way of believing, and living out that belief, is the only right one. That is, until he calls them out, clearly and directly, about how what they think they are doing, isn't what they should be doing. They just can't deal with what amounts to a challenge to their way of being, so they react the only way they can: with violence. It is designed not only to silence Stephen, but also to discourage anyone else who might share his call to speak out.

If it sounds familiar, that's because it still happens. It happened in the state legislatures in Tennessee and Montana in just the past couple of weeks. In both cases, the largely white and conservative politicians controlling those chambers have tried to silence the young and, often marginalized, voices speaking out about the harm that proposed legislation, or the lack thereof, continues to inflict on the communities they represent. In Tennessee, Representatives Justin Jones and Justin Pierce, who were expelled from the House for joining a student protest after a shooting at a school in Nashville last month, were swiftly

reappointed by their districts. In Montana, restrictions remain on Rep. Zoey Zephyr's presence and participation on the House floor after she stated her colleagues would have blood on their hands if they passed a bill restricting medical care for transgender people, though she has continued to speak out on a variety of platforms.

This kind of thing is also nothing new in the scope of recent American history. Nearly 60 years ago, a lot of the same rhetoric, from a lot of the same people, was being used to oppose change in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was among hundreds of protesters who were jailed in Birmingham, Alabama for exercising their right to protest – which, at the time, a state law in Alabama denied. The day of his arrest, a number of White clergy published an open letter in the local paper which decried the efforts led by King, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, and so many others to secure the same rights and privileges that the Jim Crow south

blatantly denied to them. From his cell, King wrote a lengthy and scathing response, which, in part, he closed thus:

I am impelled to mention one other point in your statement that troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I don't believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I don't believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys, if you would observe them, as they did on two occasions, refusing to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.

It is true that they have been rather disciplined in their public handling of the demonstrators. In this sense they have been publicly "nonviolent." But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the last few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends.

I wish you had commended the Negro demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes... One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American

*dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.*²

Standing up for the best values the tradition has to offer, and not for the warped way it is sometimes practiced, was the reason why the crowds chose to kill Stephen. His story, and that of other prophets and martyrs who followed in his footsteps, takes on a greater purpose besides being a cautionary tale, when they are told in light of the life and death of Jesus. Stephen, Martin Luther King, and those countless others throughout history who have paid with their lives for speaking the truth of God's justice remind us of what it looks like to love recklessly. They can only do it because they've entrusted themselves to Jesus, whose life and death have given their lives the same cross-like shape.³

Let us pray.

² Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf [accessed May 2, 2023].

³ Philip Ruge-Jones, "Commentary on Acts 7:55-60." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-Sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-755-60-3> [accessed May 1, 2023].

We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of the first martyr Stephen, who looked up to heaven and prayed for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ, who stands at your right hand; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.⁴

⁴ Collect for the feast of St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. In *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 139.