

## A Man Who Walked the Talk

Acts: 7:55-60 & John 14:1-14

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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### Acts 7:55-60 (NIV)

<sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

<sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

<sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

### John 14:1-14 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. <sup>2</sup> In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. <sup>4</sup> You know the way to the place where I am going."

<sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" <sup>6</sup> Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

<sup>8</sup> Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? <sup>10</sup> Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. <sup>11</sup> Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. <sup>12</sup> I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup> And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. <sup>14</sup> You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

## A Man Who Walked the Talk

There's an old story told about a rabbi who, while in Persia, found a great ruby. This was not just any ruby. It was a ruby that belonged in the emperor's crown. An official crier was sent out who went about the capital with this message: "Whoever returns the emperor's jewel within thirty days will be

rewarded.” But then he added an ominous warning: “If it be found on him after thirty days his head will be cut off.”

On the thirty-first day — a day after the deadline — the rabbi brought the ruby to the palace. The emperor asked, “Did you not hear the proclamation that the ruby must be returned within thirty days or the possessor of it will be beheaded?”

The humble rabbi responded, “Yes, your majesty, I did on the first day.” The emperor asked, “Then why did you not return the ruby until now, the thirty-first day?” The rabbi responded, “I did not return it within the thirty days so that you could not say I returned it because I feared you. I returned it because I believe in God.” The emperor was so impressed by the rabbi’s witness to his faith that he exclaimed, “Blessed be the God of these Jews!”

It is impressive when someone who believes in God bears witness to their faith — particularly if such a witness could cost them their life.

Our lesson for the day from the Book of Acts tells about one of the most beautiful, and important, acts of witness in Christian history. The Apostle Stephen had been so effective in telling people about Jesus that he was brought in on false charges before a council to be tried.

The text says that standing in front of that council, Stephen’s face shown like the face of an angel. Here was a radiant, wonderful witness for the power of Christ working in human lives. But Stephen’s words fell on deaf ears. As he described in depth how God had worked both in the life of Israel, and in the life of Jesus Christ, those who listened to him were enraged. “They ground their teeth against him,” says the writer of Acts.

At the climax of his testimony, Stephen lifted up his gaze toward the heavens and saw there the glory of God. He also saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He testified to this company, “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

At this those who heard him speak covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, the text says, he fell asleep. In other words, he died.

An important element in this story concerns a prominent witness to the stoning of Stephen. His name was Saul of Tarsus who, of course, became the great Apostle Paul.

Let’s look prayerfully at the witness of Stephen. As we do, let’s also ask ourselves about the quality of our own witness. Do we have what Stephen had?

**WE SHOULD BEGIN BY NOTING THE INTEGRITY OF STEPHEN’S WITNESS.**

He lived what he professed. He talked the talk, and he walked the walk. Obviously this is critical. The world despises a hypocrite. If a person is going to witness for Christ, he or she must be a person of integrity.

Bishop Elvind Berggrav was an important figure in the Norwegian Lutheran Church during World War II. He also was such an outspoken witness to his faith that he was kept prisoner under heavy Nazi guard. We are told that his witness to his faith was so effective, and his deeds and words of love so compelling, that the eleven guards responsible for him were constantly rotated in and out to keep them from coming under his strong spiritual leadership. That's a witness to our Lord!

Leighton Ford tells about another man who walked the walk and talked the talk. His name was Gottfried Osei-Mensah. He was the leader of a church in Africa. Osei- Mensah was brought to Christ by an English missionary. The missionary was the headmaster at the mission school Gottfried attended as a young man.

The first thing that impressed Gottfried about this headmaster was that he called him by name. He said most of the English men and women never bothered to learn the African's names. You have to care about somebody before you bother to learn his or her name. It made an impression on young Gottfried that the headmaster cared that much concerning him.

One day Gottfried went to a Bible class that the headmaster was conducting. Gottfried was a shy boy. Entering the room he found it full. There was no place to sit. Gottfried started to turn and slip out, but the headmaster saw him and called out, "Gottfried come here, there's a chair for you." The headmaster presented him a chair to sit in. It was the headmaster's own chair. Gottfried says, "To my utter mortification the headmaster sat on the floor."

Those two simple acts of Christian love — bothering to know his name and sitting on the floor so Gottfried could have a chair — impressed Osei-Mensah so much that he was led to Christ.

Years later he saw the headmaster in England and told him what his actions meant to him. Interestingly enough the headmaster did not remember those actions at all. They were so simple, so unconscious, so natural for one who was an earnest disciple of Jesus Christ, that the headmaster had not even realize the impact they had.

My friend, could another person be influenced by the quality of your love, your kindness, your life? Is there integrity in your witness to Christ? Do you really try to show care and concern for all people in the way that Christ showed His care and concern for you?

Many of us who are believers need to begin in our own home with our own spouses and our own children.

I was amused to read a story the noted pastor and writer Dr. M. R. Dehaan once told on himself. He said that one morning he and his wife had a disagreement. The disagreement was so sharp that, as they ate breakfast, he didn't say anything to her at all. In effect, he was giving her the silent treatment.

Each morning they had the ritual of reading a devotional from the little magazine, *Our Daily Bread* of which Dehaan was the editor. His wife read that day's devotional silently to herself for a moment, then taking it and shoving it under DeHaan's nose, she asked, "Are you the man who wrote this?"

He says he read the article — and felt about an inch tall. It was indeed a devotional that he had written which had to do with kindness and forbearance. He said, "That did it, we had to make up right then and there."

It is so easy to preach, but so much more difficult to practice. And yet we cannot know the deep fulfillment of Christian living unless it is real, and unless it is every day. That is the first thing we need to see — the integrity of Stephen's witness.

#### THE SECOND THING WE NEED TO NOTE IS STEPHEN'S WILLINGNESS TO PAY ANY PRICE FOR HIS FAITH.

This may be one of the most troubling aspects of Christian discipleship today — our unwillingness to pay a difficult price.

Thirty-five years ago M. Scott Peck wrote a very popular and influential book titled *The Road Less Travelled*. In that book he put great emphasis on the willingness to make hard choices. That is one secret of an effective life. Of course, we are all familiar with Jesus' words about the wide and narrow roads. The wide road is the road with few challenges. It is the easy road that requires little out of us.

We in this country tend to be a generation of people committed to the wide road — to comfort at any cost.

Clyde Reed, in his book, *Celebrate the Temporary*, writes, "One of the most common obstacles to celebrating life fully is our avoidance of pain. We dread pain... We would do anything to escape pain. Our culture reinforces our avoidance of pain by assuring us we can live a painless life. Advertisements constantly encourage us to believe that life can be pain free. But to live without pain is a myth... This is an unmistakable, clear, unalterable fact. Many of us do not realize that pain and joy run together. When we cut ourselves off from pain, we have unwittingly cut ourselves off from joy as well."

How can we even speak about taking up a cross and following Jesus to a generation that has been raised up to believe that life can be pain-free? Taking up a cross means doing whatever it takes, even if it is far outside our comfort zone, to make it obvious to others that we are a follower of Jesus.

Of course, we must be careful at this point. Christianity has been accused in the past of fostering martyr complexes — people who seek out painful situations to satisfy some deeper need.

It is interesting that a few years ago manufacturers were able to produce iodine that did not sting. They thought this was the most wonderful product that could possibly be offered on the market — antiseptic iodine that had no sting. They began imagining the millions that their innovation would bring them.

Unfortunately stingless iodine bombed in the marketplace no matter how effective it was as an antiseptic. Many people seemed to feel that without the sting the iodine must not be working. They refused to buy it. The company had to add an ingredient to their iodine to put the sting back in so that people would have confidence in their product.

While it's true that we should be willing to bear any burden, any cost, for our witness to Christ, we don't want to harbor the illusion that in order to have an effective Christian witness you must suffer. That is not Biblical truth at all. A generation ago a wise pastor named Ralph Sockman wrote a book titled *The Meaning of Suffering*. In it he said there are three kinds of trouble: There is trouble we can avoid. There is trouble we cannot avoid, and there is trouble we must not avoid.

If standing fast for our faith means that we are criticized — if being faithful in our service means we have to go to some inconvenience — if in being coworkers with God, we are required to sacrifice — then those things fall under the heading of trouble we must not avoid. If we can only be sunshine Christians in the same way that Thomas Paine described sunshine patriots, our level of commitment is inadequate.

Stephen was willing to suffer. He did not seek a way out. He merely sought to be faithful. Nevertheless, when he was confronted with the need to suffer for his faith, he did not betray Christ's trust in him. Are you willing to pay a price for your faith — to suffer some inconvenience and some sacrifice because you are a soldier of Jesus Christ? This brings us to the final thing we need to see about Stephen's witness.

#### STEPHEN WAS WILLING TO FORGIVE THOSE WHO HAD WRONGED HIM.

As he was dying, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord do not hold this sin against them." Those were his final words.

There is something within most of us that cherishes the idea of revenge. Forgiveness is for wimps. That's the attitude many of us have.

An old Scottish story tells of a man who feared he was on his death bed. He sent for an acquaintance with whom he had had a long bitter quarrel, and he asked that they put away their feelings of enmity. The acquaintance agreed and started to leave the room. It was then the old man rose up on his elbow and spoke one final word, "But remember, if I get well our old quarrel still stands."

We can understand his attitude. The need for revenge is a powerful emotion. However, compare his attitude with a woman in Florida who was raped, shot in the head, brutally mutilated and left to die. Astoundingly, she survived the ordeal — though she was left permanently blind. In a television

interview the host of the show was reflecting on the bitterness she must feel because of the many scars she had from this experience that she would have to deal with the rest of her life. Her astonishing reply was something to this effect: “Oh, no! That man took one night of my life, I refuse to give him one additional second!”

Most of us are not as wise as that woman. She realized that forgiveness is more beneficial to the person who offers it than to the person who receives it. Bitterness and resentment eat at the soul. Forgiveness is healing and a key to lasting joy.

It is very difficult for us to identify with Jesus praying on the cross on behalf of those who had put Him there. After all, He was the Son of God. We might expect that out of Him. But what about Stephen? He was a frail human being like you and me, and yet as the stones ravaged his body, he lifted up his gaze toward heaven and prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” What a powerful act of witness for the redeeming power of Jesus Christ. Could you do that?

We’ve already noted that those who stoned Stephen left their garments at the feet of one Saul of Tarsus as the mob stoned him to death. The Scriptures testify that Saul gave his assent to that act of brutality. Most scholars feel that the integrity of Stephen’s witness — the way he lived and the way he died — his willingness to pay the ultimate price for his faith, and his ability to forgive those who persecuted him — probably had a dramatic effect on Saul of Tarsus.

This event, as terrible as it was, was something that God used to prepared Saul for his conversion experience with Christ on the Damascus Road. It would be most surprising if such were not the case. Very few conversions take place in a vacuum. Usually there are a host of experiences and a multitude of people whose influence and encouragement play a part.

Could somebody find Christ because they stood by and observed a significant moment in your life? Thankfully it does happen. It happened to Saul because of the witness of Stephen. Stephen was faithful to Christ, and we suspect his influence helped shape the greatest missionary that Christendom has ever produced — the Apostle Paul.

Stephen, as a witness for his Lord, was willing to pay any price. How about us? Are we prepared to do the same?

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