

## Scripture Reading:

**Acts 7: “51 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it." 54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”**

**Acts 8:1 “Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.”**

# **''The Spirit Refines the Church''**

It is good to be back in the pulpit here at Church of the King and I want to thank Theron for his ministry to you last week. Linda and I had a blessed and challenging time in Phoenix last Lord's Day with the Saints at Emmanuel Covenant Church. As the presiding minister for CREC's Calvin Presbytery I am assisting them in their time of transition as they call a new pastor. The Saints at Emmanuel send their warm Christian greetings and they appreciate your prayers as they search for a new man to shepherd their flock.

Well today we will take our last look at Stephen's confrontation with the Jewish council there at Jerusalem.

- As we consider the first martyr for the Christian faith and the impact this event had on the early Church there will be many lessons for us to consider.

This event and these lessons come once again in a very timely manner with the Church calendar this year. Today we are celebrating Trinity Sunday which is traditionally considered the first Sunday of ordinary or normal time in the Church calendar each year. This year, ordinary time will run for twenty six Sundays bringing us again to the Advent season this fall. From Advent through Pentecost we remember our history with the coming, the ministry, the sacrifice, the Resurrection, and the Ascension of Jesus followed by the coming of the Comforter to the Church.

Just as we are commissioned each week at the end of our Covenant Renewal Worship, ready and prepared to serve the Lord Jesus during our weekly 'ordinary' time, so the Church calendar each year focuses on the ordinary aspect of our lives where we are to hear and obey our Lord and Savior. This year I have chosen a verse from the fifth chapter of Acts to remind us of this each week, where we read, "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." Acts 5:32

We should also note that we see the fullness of the Trinity in Stephen's life as he faces death where he is filled with the Holy Spirit and allowed to see into heaven where Jesus is standing at the right hand of the Father:

- Very appropriate for Trinity Sunday and something we will consider at more length as part of our application this morning.

But first I want us to consider some important lessons we should learn as Stephen faces a violent death:

- Stephen teaches us about proper confrontation
- Stephen teaches us about how a Christian should properly view death
- Stephen teaches us a lesson about forgiveness!

And finally there is a lesson for us as a Church where we once again see God's complete control over circumstances as He advances the Kingdom of His Son under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit...

- Something we will Lord-willing consider at length next week.

Our 1<sup>st</sup> lesson is about confrontation: Something Mike has discussed over and over in our study of Judges on Wednesday night:

- As we function as the Salt and Light of the world as we are called to be... There will be conflict!

God established this conflict when he told the serpent in the garden that He would put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God announced right there at the beginning what the outcome of the conflict would be:

- Jesus would indeed have His heel struck at the cross, But Satan would have his head crushed!

The work of Jesus was accomplished at the cross, confirmed by His resurrection and will be consummated at the end of time when Satan is cast into the Lake of Fire and the last enemy, death, is defeated. This conflict is carried on between the groups that follow the Son of God and those who follow Satan: The sheep and the goats; the wheat and the tares:

- God has placed enmity between them and at times we will see it very clearly.

The end of Stephen's defense was such a time: As we considered two weeks ago, rather than be convicted of their sin and repenting, these religious leaders hardened their hearts; gnashed their teeth at him; stopped their ears; and charged at Stephen, dragged him outside of the city and stoned him to death.

- There was no need for the disciples to have an after meeting review of Stephen's defense to evaluate how he could have been more seeker friendly or made his points in a more relevant way!

Stephen was filled with the Spirit before, during & after his defense & he said exactly what needed to be said. This is where we are called to be faithful and trust God for the results. We are to be ready to give an answer for the faith, but we must understand that the results are in God's hands!

- As Paul said, the Gospel is the aroma of life to those who are being saved and the stench of death to those who are lost.

[We must also remember that while we are called to be confrontational... We are NOT called to be obnoxious!]

In Stephen's case we see that the reaction is so strong that it leads to his violent death:

- Stephen is the first Christian martyr: One who gives his life in defense of the Gospel.

He would be followed by many thousands more as the Kingdom advanced across the world and Saints continue to give their lives for the faith in some portions of the globe even today. It is something that we must all as Saints ultimately be prepared to endure knowing that God will give us the strength and faith to face death should that be our calling. This leads naturally to the second lesson that Stephen teaches us:

- As servants of the most high God, Christians should be unafraid to face death.

Now I do not think Stephen wanted to be stoned: I am really sure that his wife, if he was married, did not think it was a good idea and neither would the others in the Church. But Stephen was willing to face even a violent death as he gave his defense of the Gospel and shows how we are to be confident that God is in control even in the face of death.

- None of us like to think about death, none of us want to die and certainly none of us want to die a painful death.
- However, none of us are in charge of how or when we will die...  
[let me repeat that]

Job 14:5 teaches us that a man's days are numbered by God: He knows the day of our death and that should give us great comfort! Stephen was experiencing what Jesus taught the disciples: He did not fear what these men could do to his body, but rightly feared the God who after death had the power to cast one into hell: Stephen could be at peace because he knew who his Savior was even at the point of death... As the writer of Hebrews says:

9: 27 "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God reminding us that we all will be with Him on the other side of our physical death! That is the comfort that Christians have which the world cannot take away and one that we must remember in the midst of our death or the death of Saints we love. As difficult as it is for us to truly be at peace about death, this is not the hardest lesson that Stephen has to teach us here...

- Stephen can also teach us much about forgiveness!

From Stephen we can learn what it really means to forgive AND how having such Godly forgiveness does NOT mean compromising the truth! Stephen demonstrates his peace in the midst of death by commending his spirit to the Lord Jesus as he is stoned. But then his final cry is not for himself and not one of condemnation. Stephen cries with a loud voice and asks that this sin, the sin of stoning him unjustly, NOT be charged against them!

- Here we see why Luke has told us so many times that Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit!

One could argue that Stephen could muster the peace about his death by focusing on where he was going, but there is simply NO human explanation for this final cry!

- This is the Spirit of God bringing glory to Jesus in the life of His Saints

**Rather than exhibiting anger, sorrow, revenge, outrage or any of the other perfectly justifiable emotions at this point in his wrongful execution by very violent means...**

- **Stephen reflects the love and concern that His Savior demonstrated on the cross when He cried, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do!”**

**This is something we cannot be taught to do, it is not something we can practice and it is so contrary to our human nature that if we are honest we cannot even imagine being able to do such a thing.**

- **We are ready and willing to forgive those who seek our forgiveness... Or at least Lord-willing I hope we are!**

**We can even muster up feelings of forgiveness for unrepentive people who have offended others and maybe us if it is not too serious...**

- **BUT put yourself in Stephen’s shoes and try to imagine crying out as he did...**

**These men have refused to hear the truth, have corrupted the nation of Israel, they have crucified the Savior and now they have hauled you outside the city and are hurling stones at you until you die! I would certainly be more likely to recite the words of Psalm 83 and be praying that they would soon become dung for the ground!**

**But as we consider all this we must also see the balance that we need in our Christian lives...**

**In both cases we know that Jesus and Stephen had confronted the wicked ways of these leaders...**

- **Jesus calls them white-washed graves and Stephen said they were stiff-necked murderers!**

**BUT with their dying breaths they asked that God would be merciful!**

**Yes, we are to pray those imprecatory prayers and ask that God rightly judge His enemies, as we know that He ultimately will. However, we are also called to forgive those who do sin against us: Not seven times as Peter was willing to do, but seventy times seven as Jesus instructed him!**

- **Something that is NOT humanly possible!**

**Stephen was not reacting in the flesh but in the power of the Holy Spirit! This has been the witness of martyrs for the faith down through the ages and something we must trust God to bring in our lives as well. *[our children should know the stories in Fox’s Book of Martyrs well!]***

**We struggle to forgive those who have offended us in even minor ways, no less a crowd charging at us with their ears plugged, gnashing their teeth and casting BIG stones!**

- **Why does God call us to be so forgiving?**

**There are two very good reasons...**

- **First and foremost it reflects the heart of our most merciful God: A God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and who sent His own Son to die for the sins of the world!**
- **Secondly because it is not us who determines those upon whom God will shower His mercy!**

**Paul teaches us in Romans nine that God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy... Stephen demonstrated his belief in that great truth by asking God to be merciful even to his executioners.**

**And we know that in fact God was merciful on at least one of these evil men: The one who probably gave Luke the account of this time that Stephen spent in front of the council and the account of his execution...**

- **Saul of Tarsus who would soon become Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles!**

While it is difficult for us to imagine praying for such enemies, when we see the big picture it is much easier to see the wisdom of praying that God would be merciful on the Apostle Paul...

➤ Can you imagine the Bible without His many epistles?

And finally, this account of the final hours of Stephen's life reminds us of the importance of living in God's presence! It is only there where we can rightly discern the many mysteries and challenges of the Christian life.

Stephen demonstrates what it means to live in the presence of our Triune God which is why we celebrate Trinity Sunday each year. Not that we ignore the Trinity the other fifty-one Sundays... Celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday each year does not take away from our remembrance of it each week at this Table!

In the same way, our focus on the nature of God on Trinity Sunday does not take away from our weekly Triune proclamation which begins our worship in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Easter reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus happened in real history and the proper study of the Trinity should remind us of how we are always living in God's presence.

We see this very clearly here with Stephen: Filled with the Holy Spirit so that he could look into Heaven and see the Son standing at the Father's right hand.

Today we sing songs that are focused on the Trinity and we will recite together the Athanasian Creed as we come to the Table. Now each week we sing the Apostle's Creed and confess that we worship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Simple confessions that our youngest children can learn and share. However, Tarn and Mark, or Emma and Molly are not going to understand much of what we recite today in the Athanasian Creed...

It is a long complicated creed that deals with the greatest mysteries of God's nature... And yet we confess that one must understand this to be rightly saved! Does this mean our children are lost or that we should doubt the salvation of Annie or Jane because they could not get a passing grade if we gave tests on this creed no matter how much time we spent with them?

Absolutely NOT! In fact I suspect when we get to heaven we will learn that they spend more time rightly in the presence of our Triune God than many of us do with all of our head-knowledge.

➤ The Bible commands us to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and this is where the rubber meets the road.

It is easy to see the presence of the Trinity in the life of Stephen here at the end, but that is not when God showed up! Jesus promised that He would always be with us and the promised Comforter has come, so we are always living in the presence of God.

As we mature in the faith we must grow and learn more about God: This is true of us as individuals and it is true of the Bride of Jesus, the Church as she has matured down through the centuries. It was real easy for me to capture a copy of the creed on the Internet and format it on a page for us to read and have Office Depot make copies.

What we need to remember as we read it today, it that these truths were hammered out over several centuries and the implications of these truths continue to be more fully understood down to our day. As I have said a couple of times, it is easy to see the Trinity present here with Stephen, but that does not mean it cannot cause confusion or bring questions:

The text says Jesus is standing at God's right hand: Does this mean that God the Father has a body of flesh, just as we do, the way the Mormons claim?

They could certainly use this as a proof text if you ignore other truths in the Scriptures.

**I could do a whole sermon on such concerns and questions and this is why the Athanasian Creed is so detailed and to our modern minds complex.**

- **We do not serve a ‘simple’ God as portrayed by the Mormons or Jehovah witnesses.**
- **We do not serve a detached one-dimensional god as presented by the Muslims or modern Jews.**
- **We certainly do not worship mother earth or the other ways of making created matter Divine.**

**We rightly serve and worship the Triune God of the Bible whose very character brings real meaning to love and relationships, Who gives us the understanding of good and evil: A God who often reminds us that we are mere creatures in the presence of the great Creator who could speak all there is into existence...**

- **But our Triune God is also the one who did not need the creation to be the loving God He is!**
- **He needed nothing outside of Himself to demonstrate love and justice, service and steadfastness and all of His other Holy attributes from all eternity past.**

**Perhaps you think this is not all that important... Perhaps you think we should just preach Jesus and how He died on the cross for our sins. This is not an either or situation:**

- **IF we want to be the servants that God has called us to be then we must be ready and willing to mature in our faith.**

**Understanding that our faith is as simple as Jane declaring that Jesus died on the cross so we could ALL go to heaven and our faith is as complex as what we will confess this morning! Such is what we see here at the end of Stephen’s life: His simple faith looks to Jesus for comfort and his eyes of faith are able to see the reality that we live in each and every hour of each and every day!**

**As we confess what we believe about the nature of God this morning I want us all to keep this picture of Stephen in our minds and how he died in the presence of God: Filled with the Holy Spirit, seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God...**

**Stephen was protected by the eternal, almighty, Lord of the universe! Not seeing three eternal, but one eternal, not protected by three almightys but by one almighty and not serving and loving three Lords, but one Lord. These are not academic statements or concepts for a textbook, but great truths that help us see the meaning and purpose of our lives!**

**We see them here with Stephen and we need to desire them in our lives.**

**If we neglect such things, we will not have the kinds of relationships that God desires us to have...**

- **Not with our wives or husbands, not with our friends and neighbors and certainly not with our enemies!**

**Stephen knew who he served and he served God well...**

**Remember, this is what got him in trouble in the first place: Caring for the Hellenist widows as he was called to do.**

**Being filled with the Spirit he was able to give a defense for the faith & knowing he was in the presence of God gave him comfort in his death.**

**We see it also in the lives of those devout men who in the midst of growing persecution came to bury and grieve over Stephen as they should have done.**

Whether it is the ordinary service of God in our everyday lives or the crucible of affliction that sometimes comes to us in His great plan...

- Our desire must always be to know more and more about our great redeemer.

And in the end, if we are faithful and grow in maturity and obedience, we will declare with Paul as he did at the end of his discussion of some of the great mysteries of the faith:

33 "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" 35 "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?" 36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

- This is the great God whom we confess on this Trinity Sunday: May we, in the power of the Spirit, serve Him faithfully this week and always!

**Communion Meditation: Psalm 23:**

**“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

**2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;**

**He leads me beside the still waters.**

**3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.**

**4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

**5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.**

**6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.”**