

## **Easter 5A. Acts and John 14:1-14. May 14, 2017.**

The martyrdom of Stephen marks the definitive end of the honeymoon of the early church. As you may know, the book of Acts traces the earliest years of the church after Easter. And in the first chapters of Acts there is a definite pattern to how things work. There is some great sign or miracle; someone preaches a sermon; and then thousands of people join the church and the pattern starts over again. But things begin to get complicated in chapter 5 and the pattern is broken by the end of chapter 7, which we heard this morning.

In the first weeks of the church, everything is wonderful. People are joining those on the Way every day, everyone is getting along well, and people are sharing all things in common. And that last part is where the problems start. In chapter 5 of Acts, two folks try to game the system—they pretend to sell everything they have and put it into the common pool of resources, but in fact they have held some back for themselves. Their deception is revealed and they're struck dead and something starts changing. Things aren't quite so idyllic anymore, but the apostles are continuing to teach and preach in public and the church is continuing to grow and it looks like the little hiccup of a couple folks being struck dead for embezzlement might be over.

And then the Christians who identify as Greek start to notice that the widows of their community aren't getting a fair share of the common resources of the church and they bring a complaint against the Hebrew party to the apostles. The apostles decide that they need a new order of ministry to take care of this sort of thing, and so they ordain deacons, one of whom is Stephen, and these folks make sure that the widows, the children, and the poor are taken care of in the new church, as well as going around spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. It's another hiccup, but hopefully it's been sorted out by a good HR maneuver and we can all get back to the utopian procession of the church towards glory.

Until Stephen is arrested. Now the apostles have already been arrested several times and they came through more or less unscathed and the way they conducted themselves on trial even brought more converts to the faith. So there's no need to panic at Stephen's arrest. And just like the apostles before him, he delivers a barnstorming sermon telling everyone who will listen very clearly about the corruption and hypocrisy of the religious leaders. But this time, he doesn't get out unscathed and his trial does not result in a new wave of converts. It is ugly and brutal and things are never quite the same again.

Christianity continues to grow. Christians continue to do remarkable things in caring for the needy and healing the sick. But that luster of the first weeks after Pentecost is gone. Day to day life in the church is no longer a procession from triumph to triumph. There is less emphasis on sharing all aspects of life. Real persecution begins; people start to get killed. Exuberance begins to give way to ambiguity. Excellent things are still happening, but they no longer feel quite so easy.

This is where today's sermon lies: that place where things that started wonderfully are starting to get a little more complicated. Now hopefully the examples we're most likely to face are less brutal and horrible than martyrdom. But there is still

pain at the moment when it turns out that this amazing new job actually carries with it some deeply uncomfortable relationships with superiors; when you realize that your new spouse being a slob isn't so endearing when you find a discarded plate of cookies under the couch three weeks later; when the fantastic group of volunteers who have reawakened your sense of civic duty have a vicious falling out over a tangential political issue. When the loving church you've joined turns out not to see your gifts in the same way you do.

Any of these examples will do, along with much more extreme examples going all the way up to martyrdom, to make the point that this tends to happen. We join something wonderful, whether it's a movement or a family or a social group or a mission or a church and we're carried along in it by excitement and joy and that fresh Holy Spirit smell. And then difficulty and ambiguity creep in and we have to find a new way to sustain our commitment. Or we have a mountaintop spiritual experience and then life goes back to normal and we hit that lull and eventually begin to doubt whether it was really as awesome as we thought.

I don't have a fail-proof solution for this dynamic. I don't have a guaranteed way to avoid it or to restore that first flush holy high of Pentecost. I hope that there is some power in just naming it, and in asserting that it happens even to the mothers and fathers of the church, to those who walked with Jesus and forged the first ways that a group of people responds to Jesus.

But we can go a little further. We can see from this coming back to earth of the early church that God is in not only the holy highs—God is at work also down in the muck when things get complicated and ambiguous and the victories start to cost us a little more. It's after the garden of Eden proto-communist everything is going great days that the church expands to include people who aren't Jewish. It's after the persecution starts that the church spreads beyond Jerusalem. It's after the work gets hard that a young man named Saul has his life turned upside-down, changes his name to Paul, and writes most of the New Testament.

Those first heady moments of solidarity, of resistance, of something new and righteous and exciting are what get us moving and they are holy. But when the high fades, it doesn't take the holiness with it. Holiness and easiness are not dependent on each other. Parenting is still holy when the epidural wears off and the kid is screaming at 2:00 in the morning. Civic engagement can still be holy after the march has ended and the long boring work of showing up to town halls has started to get a little bit lonely. And what we do here together is still holy when you get stuck on a committee or the sermon hasn't seemed to connect for a while or you've cycled off a ministry that gave you life and you aren't sure where you fit in anymore.

The hardness, the struggle, the boredom, the slog can also be holy gospel work. God is not afraid to dwell in our ambiguity and frustration. On the contrary, the arc of the book of Acts shows us that the grace and love of God continue to push forward through the lulls and hiccups and even the tragedies. Amen.