

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 22, 2011,
(Year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey
Readings: Acts 7:55-60 and 1 Peter 2:2-10

Sunday after Sunday we gather to hear God's Word, trying to make sense of what it has to say to us in our lives today.

Sunday after Sunday we offer our prayers to God, confessing human brokenness and seeking strength.

Sunday after Sunday "we lift our hearts to the Lord" – or so we claim – giving thanks and praise to God.

And yet when we come to that moment of awe in the liturgy – Sunday after Sunday – joining our voices with angels and archangels/with heavenly beings and all creation, IS it *awe* we sense as we proclaim,

"Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest?"

Writer Annie Dillard presses this point in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk* where she says, "On the whole, I do not find Christians – outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?"¹

Not many I suspect, although in today's reading from *The Acts of the Apostles*, Stephen is sufficiently aware of conditions as he gazes on the glory of God, announcing none-too-blithely, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Granted, Stephen is likely a catacomb-insider in Dillard's mind – a saint of old who knew God's power. If so, though, his listeners are as well, which means that saints and sinners – awed *and* apathetic alike – exist in the past, present, and possibly future. Consequently, Stephens speaks to *ALL* who are so guarded against the Spirit that they refuse to recognize God's glory, covering their ears instead. You'd think they'd cover their eyes, but the fact is that Stephen's audience – comprised of the high priest and mob that has jealously handed him over – have heard enough from this deacon who has preached for the past 53 verses on the tenets of Israel's faith and *their* unfaithfulness.

Likewise, they've heard enough of the indictment that concludes his sermon, where Stephen says to his accusers and the high priest trying his case, "You

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1983), p. 40.

bullheaded people! You're just like your ancestors, forever opposing the Holy Spirit.”Remember, now, that Stephen’s indictment also includes modern listeners who’re NOT in catacombs, but turn a blind eye to the Spirit like our ancestors did. We turn a blind eye to her power as one blithely summoning a servant, rather than standing in awe before God who summons us to serve.

“Help the poor; heal the sick; bring peace to the world,” we demand, blaming God when failure comes. We blame the One that *we* render impotent, forgetting Jesus’ life of service – a life/a model repeated in *Acts* by Stephen whom the early church calls as deacon, or “one who serves.” This call comes one chapter earlier in *Acts* (6:1-6), when the Apostles – busy preaching and teaching – realize that the needs of widows in their community are being neglected. Not wanting to neglect their own call to preach and teach, the Twelve suggest that the community identify wise members among them – who’re in good standing and filled with the Holy Spirit – to serve the marginalized; and they do.

They call faithful members, unlike the deacon of one church who when asked by the rector whether she thought their decline in attendance was because people were unaware of their need for God or because they were apathetic, answered, “I don’t know and I don’t care.” This community calls someone who cares. They call Stephen and six others who become the first deacons – ordained by laying on of hands – to serve those in need. This order still exists today, and in the Episcopal Church is one of its four distinct orders of ministry. The other three include bishops, priests, and laity (which means “the people” in Greek). Such orders, however, may not be as distinct as we make out, but rather overlap considerably in ministers that Peter in today’s second reading refers to as, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”

This ministry, also known as the “priesthood of all believers,” is service to which we are called and in which we’re all empowered in baptism. We empowered to “proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness,” writes Peter, “into his marvelous light of Jesus Christ. That said, *deacons* are called to proclaim Christ’s message chiefly in acts of service among the marginalized, bringing the Church to the world. At the same time, they bring the world to the Church, informing those who might be too comfortable in their religion, that there are others in need.

You might say that deacons, “Comfort the needy and needle the comfortable,” which is undoubtedly risky ministry, leading Stephen to his death. On the other hand, such ministry emulates Christ, showing us that Christianity – or for that matter other faiths that follow a path of love and service – is not about a set of rules to be kept but a way of life to be lived. Such is the life of Hilde Back, whose seemingly small act of service is recounted in the inspiring film *A Small Act*. This documentary, released last year for HBO, tells the story of Chris

Mburu, a human rights advocate for the United Nations, whose life was forever changed by a woman he had never met.

This woman was Hilde Back, now 85 years old, who was sent to Sweden as a child to escape the Holocaust. Her family died in Nazi Germany and Hilde never married, but she became a teacher who once said, “I have had many, many children, one who lived in a mud house in Kenya.” That child was Chris Mburu, whom she did not know, but to whom she sent \$15 a month for many years so that he attend to school. She hoped that her “small act’ would make a difference in the life of a child, allowing him to get an education . . . and THAT he did.

Mburu attended primary and secondary school in Kenya, thanks to Hilde Back’s support. He went on, though, to the University of Nairobi, and later graduated from Harvard Law School. Today Chris is a Human Rights lawyer for the United Nations and a servant of God who spends much of his time fighting genocide and injustice. Part of this fight includes the *Hilde Back Education Fund* – a scholarship program Chris founded and named for his former benefactor long before he ever met her.

This story, and many others like it, is one way that I see the glory of this God who comes to us in servanthood, opening the possibility of heaven right here before our very eyes. All we have to do is look, listen, and notice the Spirit we blithely invoke Sunday after Sunday. All we have to do is serve – in small ways or large – the way that Jesus has served us.

In fact, we don’t have to give up our very life the way that Jesus did or that Stephen does in today’s first reading. Just a few dollars or a few hours can make a difference. We can serve the homeless, for example, by signing up to work one short shift for PADS this summer. We can reach out to others at “A Day in our Village.” We can welcome and get to know someone in coffee hour this morning that we don’t *already* know. O we can simply open our eyes to the signs and wonders of God in our midst and say thanks. One small act can make a difference, especially Sunday after Sunday, week after week, month after month. It adds up, changing our lives and the lives of others. *Amen.*