

Acts 6: 7-7:2; 7:51-8:3
I Peter 2: 4-10
John 15: 12-16a

Stones and Stoning
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A couple of weeks ago, William and I were in Rome, the Eternal City. It is a very walkable place, and around every corner is another church or Roman ruin or great work of art. History, layers of history, are literally everywhere. Some ancient places are remarkably preserved; other Roman buildings were clearly cannibalized for building materials by those who wanted palaces and churches in later centuries. Stones everywhere.

And the churches! Each one, it seems, filled with paintings, mosaics and sculptures that tell the story of our faith. I have noticed on other trips to Italy that there was a real fascination with physical death in a lot of this art: ornate reliquaries with a bit of some saint's bone in it, the suffering Christ on the cross, paintings of the martyrdoms of both obscure and well-known saints. Martyrdom was and is clearly celebrated as the mark of true devotion to God. And the legends depicted are often quite ingenious...shockingly, gruesomely so. I was particularly struck (so to speak) at the church of Saint Agnes in Agony (yes, that's the name of the church) with a marble relief of the stoning of St Emerentiana. I am sure that you are all familiar with St. Emerentiana? Well, she was St. Agnes' step- sister, and when she was discovered praying at St. Agnes' tomb, she was stoned to death. The marble relief is remarkable for its sense of action, with one man holding a large stone above his head, ready to hurl it, and another reaching down to pick up one in each hand, his avid, fierce eyes fixed on the praying girl. It's a lesson in how to make mob violence into art.

Today we got a similar story in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It's not a story that I was eager to preach on, at first. It's a distressing tale, involving both anti-Jewish invective and bloody injustice. It is horrifying to think that execution by stoning ever happened, let alone consider that it is still on the books as a legal punishment in some parts of the world. There is something shocking about the intimacy, and the slow-motion ruin of a human body, that defies the imagination. And I am not sure that beautiful Renaissance and Baroque works of art help with this.

But...death by stoning was not just mob violence. We see the command to stone in our own Holy Book, for crimes like being a wizard or certain kinds of theft or certain sexual crimes, or blasphemy. Fear of stoning must have kept a lot of people in line, over the centuries. And participation in stoning would have created both victims and criminal citizen executioners.

So who was St. Stephen, and why did he have to die? We are introduced to Stephen early in the 6th chapter of Acts, which describes – guess what – a church dispute, the first one in history. There were two groups in the earliest church. One spoke Greek and the other spoke Aramaic. The Greek-speaking folks felt that they were getting shortchanged at the supper table, so the leadership suggested that seven men be put in charge of fair distribution of food. They were called deacons, and Stephen was one of them. So he was trusted and respected, not so much as a missionary or preacher, but as someone who could handle a soup ladle. If we remember that the word “martyr” actually means “witness,” we might say that Stephen is already a martyr, a witness, to the value of service and fairness in community.

Soon, though, he finds another vocation: arguing with some fellow Jews about faith. He is falsely accused of blasphemy and put on trial. Now, Stephen was Jewish himself, and it is important to notice that he does not seem to be setting up a new religion. The long sermon or testimony he gives – we skipped over most of this in the reading – is a re-telling of a shared history of faith from Abraham to Joseph to Moses to David to Solomon. And his questioning about the importance of Temple ritual echoes many such complaints from the Hebrew prophets. They share all this faith language. Stephen frames this in familiar terms of two groups: those who accept God’s message and messengers and those who reject them.

What we heard this morning, though, is a shocking shift in tone. Stephen goes from “**our** shared history and faith” to “**you** stiff-necked betrayers and murderers.” The murder of Jesus is just one more example of the injustice and violence of those who can do nothing but kill those who have come to challenge and save them. There is no “Repent and believe the Good News,” no “Jesus came to give you abundant life” – just hard accusations. Is this our mild-mannered table server? What provoked this verbal attack? Those listening are enraged, but Stephen doesn’t stop there. He describes a heavenly vision: seeing Jesus with God. Now, claiming to be able to see God at all is tremendous hubris, shocking to devout Jews who believe that human eyes cannot behold divinity. It’s the last straw. In a fury, without even waiting for a death sentence, they drag Stephen off. In words that echo Jesus on the cross, he commends his spirit to God and breathes forgiveness with his last breath. A martyr, A hero. Of course he is honored as the first Christian to give his life for following Jesus.

And yet...I am still uncomfortable with this story. Stephen’s arrest is portrayed as a necessary development, he is a necessary witness, and he died a necessary death. This one event then unleashes even more violence. “That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem,” it says. The Pharisee Saul, standing by as an approving observer, is empowered to arrest and persecute Stephen’s friends. And persecution continued in other, less-expected forms. Later on, Stephen’s sermon became a weapon that has cost many Jews through the centuries much pain and death at the hands of Christians. His hate-filled attack on them and their forebears led to suffering beyond recounting, in nearly every country of the world. Yes, I am uncomfortable with this story of stones and stoning.

But, as often happens, I want to rescue the story from my own reactions. I don’t want to throw it on the rubbish heap of history. I want to find some take-away message, some glimmer of light and hope. What can we possibly find in this story to build us up?

Like a pebble thrown in a pond, Stephen’s life and death, much like Jesus’ life and death earlier, had a ripple effect that could not have been predicted. First, the church in Jerusalem was scattered. But was that all bad? It is because the church was scattered and grew beyond the city of its birth that we are sitting here today. The followers of Jesus’ Way had to grow up and leave home, so to speak, and to build new households elsewhere. Second, there are those devout men who made “loud lamentation” over Stephen and buried his body. These were not members of the Christian community, but devout Jews who mourned this violent outcome. Tradition says that it was Gamaliel and Nicodemus, members of the council themselves, who took on this role of mourners. Already reconciliation was at work: small building blocks of compassion, and hearts were moved. And then there is Saul, the fire-breathing persecutor, standing by. Our story ends with his zeal unabated. But still, something was underway even in his hard heart. He will see a heavenly light as well, he will hear the voice of Jesus calling him to a new way of life as Paul the apostle.

Luke, the author of Acts, clearly saw this as a pattern. Jesus was violently unjustly killed, but raised to even greater power and influence with his friends. Stephen was violently and unjustly killed, but this led to the conversion both devout and overzealous men. Eventually Saul (or Paul) will be martyred as well, leaving behind his own legacy and witness. The ripples will spread out over the whole known world, from Jerusalem to Rome. And, unlike the angry and bitter words of Stephen, the apostle Paul will pray that his Jewish friends will see the wonderful joy of the new Christians and will feel a desire to join in. For Paul eventually all Israel will find its way into the arms of Jesus. In every generation the ripples go outward: we re-enact the dying and the rising. We re-enact the breaking and the mending. We re-enact the destruction and the building. Maybe it is tragic, but it also contains a kernel of hope.

The letter of Peter talks about stones in another way. Curiously, it gives us both positive and negative ways to look at stones. He calls us to be “living stones,” and calls us to allow ourselves to be built together into a spiritual house. But he also suggests that the message of Christ can be a stone that makes people stumble. In our readings, stones can build or they can kill. Stones can be precious or they can be rubble. It is confusing; it is not straightforward, this business of following Jesus.

What is clear, though, is that the following is not an individual path or an individual promise. It is a call to community. We are not a random pile of rocks, or even a monolithic monument to some distant God. By coming together in love, we become a kind of temple, a holy and powerful household, anchored in the cornerstone of the one who gave us the love commandment.

I wish that I could say that that love commandment has always been the blueprint, the dominating principle for those who seek to follow Jesus. But we are not that virtuous, all the time. The early church got into arguments about whether everyone was getting their share of food. They got into arguments with their fellow Jews. They accused each other of blasphemy and corruption. They hurled stones of accusation and built walls of resentment. Can we resist these temptations and follow the love commandment instead, even to the point of suffering and death? What will we do with the stones scattered on the ground around us? Build or destroy?

I wish that I could say that the lessons of persecution were learned by our ancestors in faith: that they could find unity in essentials but freedom and diversity of practice. Unfortunately, the examples of persecution, both physical and verbal continued. But we have saints, or people with moments of saintly clarity, to show us the way of forgiveness and mercy. Saints like Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.” And, to close, I would like to leave you with these hopeful words of Thomas More to those who sentenced him to death in the 16th century:

“More have I not to say (my Lords) but like as the blessed Apostle St. Paul, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was present, and consented to the death of St. Stephen, and kept their clothes that stoned him to death, and yet be they now both twain holy saints in heaven, and shall continue as friends for ever, so I verily trust and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your Lordships have now in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet

together to our everlasting salvation.” (William Roper, The Life of St. Thomas More, paragraph 5-7).