

Worship – April 20, 2008
The Stoning of Stephen
Acts 7

Blasphemous Words

The Book of Acts, that is the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, could also be known as the book recording the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Such a poignant text for this evening's worship – one that almost jumps from the page because it seems so present and living in our community this evening. This is not a text that a few of us put our heads together to select. It would have seemed almost at the least embarrassing and might have been an act of manipulation to do so. Instead, *this* is the text selected long ago as part of the lection for this Sunday; the Fifth Sunday of Easter. The lectionary has a three year cycle – A, B, C, The Gospel text is always read with Matthew in year A, Mark in year B and Luke in year C. The Gospel of John is interspersed throughout all three years on holy days and other special days in the church year. The Acts of the Apostles, however, is read in every year of the cycle. Readings from the Acts are found on each Sunday of Easter – until the celebration of Pentecost. I celebrate the lectionary writers placing such special emphasis on the Acts. May these readings – as the Quakers would invite- “speak to our condition.”

This evening, we revisit portions of the story Peter & John and of the story of Stephen. I believe that it is important to hear a bit of each of these accounts as they give glimpses into the reality of discipleship, reminders of what it means to count the cost, and the ultimate reminder that the church is not yours or mine or someone else's; truly it is the body of Christ.

Peter & John – empowered by the Spirit at Pentecost – are spending their days at the temple. They engage themselves with the needs of the people who pour in and out of the of the temple, healing sick persons and retelling the salvation story of the Jewish people – only now the story has a new twist. Instead of only speaking of the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, Peter also speaks of the God who has glorified his servant Jesus. The response from the powers that be...annoyance, threats, imprisonment, floggings and demands of conformity, most of all strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus accompany them at every turn. Time and time again, Peter and John find themselves in trouble and in prison, yet at least for the meantime...again and again they find themselves released and rejoicing!

Then there was Stephen, a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”..., one “confronted, seized and brought before the council.” Stephen, a man “full of grace and power,”... one dragged out of the city and stoned to death by leaders in the church.

How could this be? Stephen had such stellar qualities... “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit,” “a man full of grace and power.” Surely he would be welcome by everyone. Who wouldn't want such a man in their midst? Who wouldn't want to draw near to find out more from his insights and leadings? What gripe could we have with such a person?

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What could cause us to become so “enraged?” that we ultimately need to exterminate such a person?

This is the experience of an anxious crowd, the brooding, seething anger of folks who dare not acknowledge that what they have always claimed as truth may have reached its limits and is begging for new life.

To deny that which was evident before their eyes, of the lame springing to their feet, the sick receiving restoration...was possible because those outraged folks were part of a religious community that as Douglas John Hall writes, “believed itself to be in possession of ‘the Truth’.” He notes, “Such a community is a community equipped with the most lethal weapon of any warfare: the sense of its own superiority and mandate to mastery.” He continues, “The theological triumphalism of Christendom must be altered if the Christian faith is to exist in the world of today and tomorrow as a force for life and not death.” He suggests that when we move from the dynamic work of *theology* to the static system of *ideology* we have “surrounded ourselves with an intellectually and psychologically comforting insulation from the frightening and chaotic mishmash of daily existence. For the ideologue it is not necessary to expose oneself to the ongoingness of life; one knows in advance what one is going to find in the world...the ideological personality is constantly on guard against the intrusion of reality, of the unallowable question, of the data that does not fit the system.” Jose Bonino writes of “the ideological misuse of Christianity as a tool of oppression.” Pg.25

Hall invites us to consider a different vantage point. Instead of an *ideology of glory*, he offers us invitation to seek after a *theology of the cross*. At first, these may seem like blasphemous words!

The ones wanting to clamp down on the apostles’ teachings feared their words, but it was much more. They feared an unacknowledged reality that “Jesus will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.” Walter Brueggemann names this as the “The Threat of Life.”

Reading from *The Threat of Life*. Pg. 152ff.

At the time of his ministry, Stephen saw more clearly than others that Jesus’ teachings would change the customs. At the time of his death, Stephen saw clearly that Jesus’ teachings would begin by changing local customs and ultimately change the world.

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The Spirit of the living Christ continues to challenge customs and shake the world. The community of faith must participate in what Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, pg. 3 names as a “continuous process of disciplined and prayerful thought seeking to understand what it believes and thus to be guided in its living out of that belief.”

Friends, what might there possibly be that is so ground-breaking ...earth-shaking and ... **life-giving to others** that *we* can't endure hearing it. What news might there possibly be that is so **provoking (and strangely at the same time inviting)** to *us* that we stop up our ears and cry out in rage, grinding our teeth so that nothing else can be heard except the roar within one's own spirit? May we consider that there might be a great gift in so called “blasphemous words!”

Quote from Bruegemann pg 157 last paragraph AMEN

(Stephen)

A few questions:

1. Is there a place for righteous indignation? What does that look like?
2. Are we aware that uncritical presuppositions of faith can be used/misused by any of us when we have an ax to grind? What are our checks & balances?
3. Are the actions of believers the acting out of foundational beliefs, whether in conscious or unconscious ways? What are the consequences of our belief?
4. It is possible to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic expressions of faith? How?
5. What are the powers and principalities that have vested interests in deploying the energies of faith? To what ends? Are there others besides the church?

Cultic god vs cosmic Christ.

- Covenant with Abraham was so that through the children of Abraham – blessing would come to all the families of the earth. (Peter's address)

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?” (Stephen in his speech just prior to this, had once again brought up the people's creation of the golden calf...could the temple be compared to such a mistake? Could the people remember that the idea of a King had never been God's choice for them?)

Call to Communion:

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Which of us if our child were to ask us for bread would give the child a stone? However, how many of us, when we are offered the bread of life, reach out instead for a stone?

Friends, we gather to remember the gift of bread, the gift of the bread of life... which even on the night that Jesus was betrayed was offered as so many times before. Jesus said, this bread is my body, take, eat...and remember...

In the same way, Jesus, also took the cup, the living waters, and said, when you gather together in my name, share the cup.....drink deeply...and remember.