Acts 7: 51-60

Stratford CRC 2024-12-29 AM service

 This morning we are going to be looking at the second half of the story of Stephen as it is found in the book of acts chapter 7. Last time I was here, we talked about the first part of the Story of Stephen, the first martyr, but we only covered the first part of the story. Before we get into our text this morning, I want to remind us of the context of where we are in this story. So back in chapter 6 we read about the establishment of the deacons and 2 men are mentioned by name. One of those men was Stephen. Now Stephen performed wonders and signs among the people and when he did that, he was preaching the gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ. Opposition arose, however and what ended up happening is that the people that Stephen was arguing with couldn’t stand up against his arguments. So instead of arguing with him on the arguments, they drew up false witnesses to lie about what Stephen was doing and so Stephen is brought before the sanhedrin.

 Now, the part that we aren’t going to read this morning is the first 50 verses of chapter 7. In these first 50 verses, Stephen is asked one simple question: “are these charges true?” It’s a simple question, but Stephen makes a speech to the Sanhedrin and what we need to know for our purposes this morning is that in this speech he explains the history of their faith back to Abraham. Stephen explains the covenant God made with Abraham, the story of Joseph, Moses and the Exodus, all the way up to the tabernacle. This afternoon I encourage you to go back and read this portion, as it’s an interesting summary of a large part of Genesis and Exodus.

 What we need to understand about the history that Stephen gives is that God has been faithful to His people, and God’s people have wandered from God. So Stephen gives this big speech about the history of the faith, and the peoples wandering from God and God’s faithfulness to his people, and then he concludes with our text this morning.

**Pray/Read**

 I don’t know if you guys remember, but a few years ago, there was a movement called the WWJD movement. WWJD stood for what would Jesus do. I looked it up to remember it correctly and the internet said that it was a movement that was popularised in the 1900’s. So if you want to feel really old in a quick hurry, go on the internet. But it was this movement where people were wearing bracelets and other clothing that had the letter WWJD on them. These things that you wore were meant to be a reminder to live imitating the life of Christ. So the idea was that in every situation that you were in, you were supposed to stop and think- WWJD and allow that to influence how you lived your life.

 Now, the movement faced some criticism that was unfair in my opinion, because people said “well I can’t be Jesus. I can’t die for the human race. I can’t be without sin. I can’t write scripture. I can’t do all of the things that Christ did.” Fair enough, that’s true, but the idea behind the movement was to live your life in as close an imitation of Christ as was possible. It was a good reminder to have, and I wonder sometimes if it should make a comeback.

 The reason I bring up this movement is because in our text this morning we see Stephen living out this WWJD movement! I’m almost 100% certain that he wasn’t wearing the bracelet, but there are striking similarities between how Stephen conducts himself, and how Jesus conducts himself before His crucifixion. So this morning we are going to go through this text and see how Stephen is imitating Christ in his actions.

 Vs 51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” So Stephen has just given this long history for God’s people and about how they wandered from God, and he begins his conclusion saying “you stiff necked people!” which means you stubborn people! Stiff necks means that you have your head high in the air. Even when confronted with something you’ve done wrong, you don’t allow your head to bow in humility or repentance, your neck remains stiff in your stubbornness. Then Stephen says that their hearts and ears were still uncircumcised. Circumcision was the sign that God gave to His people as a sign of the covenant He made with them. It also was an outward symbol that set them apart from other peoples and nations. When Stephen says that their hearts and ears are still uncircumcised, what he is saying is that even though outwardly, they show all of the signs of being God’s chosen people, on the inside they haven’t been set apart. Internally, which is where faith is, (we can’t see someone’s belief on the outside) they are empty and not God’s people. The reason they are empty inside as Stephen says is because they resist the Holy Spirit.

 Vs 52: Was there ever a prophet you ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one. Now you have betrayed and murdered him.” So Stephen accuses the sanhedrin of killing “the righteous one.” Now, the righteous one, or the just one, was an OT title used for the Lord almighty. So here Stephen isn’t just saying that they’ve killed Jesus the man, he is accusing them of killing the messiah that has been foretold in the OT.

 Now, it’s interesting to note, that this isn’t the first time that the Sanhedrin will have heard this accusation. In fact, just in the book of Acts alone, we saw Peter say it at Pentecost, Peter said it again after healing the lame beggar, Peter and John said it when they stood before the Sanhederin, and now Stephen says it. So this sanhedrin has been told over and over that they are responsible for killing, not just a man, but that messiah.

 This time, it strikes a different chord with them. Verse 54 says “when the member of the sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.” Now, I’m not usually picky on translations because I don’t want you to think that scripture can’t be understood if you can’t read the original languages- that isn’t true. However, that being said, I don’t think that the NIV translated this perfectly. Other translations didn’t say that they were furious, it said that they were cut to the heart. If you look at the Greek words they are the words sawn apart or separated, and heart. I think this difference matters because it gives us a different picture of how these men reacted.

Being furious isn’t a bad reaction to being called the killer of the messiah that your people have been waiting on for generations. Being mad at that is a perfectly acceptable response. And if you didn’t kill the messiah, your anger may even be righteous. However, being cut to the heart shows and emotional response to the accusation. These men have heard this accusation several times at this point, but the difference here is that rather than a calculated response they feel this pain at an emotional level: they are cut to the heart.

Vs55. Stephen, full of the HS, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look, he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Stephen saying this draws a direct parallel to what Jesus said in Mark 14 when Jesus was standing in front of the sanhedrin being questioned. The high priest asked him if He was the Son of the Blessed One. Jesus Responds. “I am… and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

It was at this point in Jesus' story that they tore their clothes and accused him of blasphemy. They stuck Him and spit on Him and that was when his trial was over. The same people - the sanhedrin now hear Stephen say “I see the Son of man at the right hand of God the Father!” Not that much time has passed. They remember Jesus. They surely remember that it was that statement from Jesus which allowed them to accuse Him of blasphemy. Now, with open wounds to their hearts- with the emotional response to the truth that has been presented to them, Jesus' words ring in front of them again. So they hear the accusation that they killed the messiah once again, they react to that accusation at an emotional level, and now the prophecy that Jesus made about himself is thrown back in their face and Stephen tells them the thing that Jesus predicted has come to pass.

Even thought they have this emotional reaction, their reaction is the same reaction that they had to Jesus. Stephen has just spoken blasphemy in front of them. “They covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.” They had been waiting for the evidence of wrongdoing and they found it. As soon as they heard it, all of them together like a pack of wild animals rushed Stephen, dragged him out, and began to stone him, which was the punishment for blasphemy.

“Meanwhile, witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” This is the first time we are introduced to Saul who would be Paul.

“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them. “ When he said this, he fell asleep.”

The similarities between Christ’s crucifixion and this event are so clear. Crying out to God, and asking for the guilty not to have their sin held against them, these are both things that Jesus did while he was on the Cross.

Then we read that Stephen fell asleep. I wish I could say that the text means he fell asleep but Falling asleep in the Bible is a euphemism for dying. When I was a kid I thought maybe God put him to sleep because then he wouldn’t feel the stones. Maybe it was written that way for the benefit of us when we are children to spare us from reality.

This was the story of Stephen being stoned. Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian church. There is a pile of stuff that we can glean from this story. I covered it in two sermons, but I feel like you could spend 4 or 5 going through everything this has to teach us. I want to suggest a couple of thoughts about this passage, then we’ll close.

 First thought is this. Two people can hear the same message and respond to it in completely different ways. This message that Stephen preached was not new. Peter preached it a few times, John once- 2 of those times that said it in front of the sanhedrin. Now, when Peter and John preached this in the temple and accused the people of being at least partially responsible for the death of the messiah, people were likely angry. But even though they were angry (or maybe hurt,) they didn’t respond the way that the Sanhederin does in our text this morning. When he preached it at Pentecost 5000 people believed. When he preached it after he healed the lame beggar, another 3000 MEN believed! The same message caused some to believe and caused some to become angry.

I think a big part of how you react to being cut to the heart is how the Spirit is leading you, and producing fruit in you. I don’t want to suggest that those who react and receive the free gift of grace are somehow better, or more emotionally intelligent than those that get angry. I do want to suggest though, that the more time you spend considering WWJD, and the more time you spend in Holy Spirit driven hard work trying to produce fruits of the Spirit like peace, patience kindness, gentleness, love joy, faithfulness and self control- the more likely you are to react well to being cut to the heart.

Also, I don’t think that the goal is to avoid being cut to the heart. In fact, I think that at some point you must be! I don’t believe that everyone has to have a big damascus road event when they come to Jesus. I don’t think that it’s necessarily a distinct moment. I do think, however, that at some point you do need to be cut to the heart. At some point you need to realise that you are a sinful person and need a savior. At some point you will need to realise that it is your sin that held Jesus to the cross. It is because of your total depravity and rebellious nature that Jesus had to humble himself to this terrible death. It is through the Holy Spirit’s guidance that we are cut to the heart, then respond with obedience and faithfulness rather than anger.

Second thought. It’s become popular in the mainstream mega Christian churches to emphasise the love of Jesus- and that’s great when done correctly. Here we see what true love, that emulates Christ's love, looks like. Stephen loved these people that despised him so much that he went to death in order to tell them the truth. He even asks God not to hold his death against them. Brother and sisters, this is what true love for our neighbor looks like. Our society and culture would have us believe that true love of neighbor is to leave them be and leave them to a broken world and system which will inevitably end in destruction. Our society would have us say “you do you” and not point out the sin that our world is currently living in. We know that it will ultimately end with an eternity separate from God where the weeping and gnashing of teeth will never end. Brother and sisters: that is not Love! Love is risking it all so that even the people who will hate you will hear of the good news of Jesus Chirst. When you hear “love your neighbor, " if you don’t know what that looks like, look here. Love so great that Stephen literally loved his enemies to death. We don’t risk death typically for telling the truth- for calling out sin. But we do risk being socially outcast. And I don’t think it's very hard to imagine a near future where we could be punished legally for calling out the sins we see in our society. True love for your neighbor means risking it all so that they would know the good news of the Gospel; Even if they will hate you for telling them.

 Final thought. I believe that every sermon at some point, needs to point us to Jesus. In this case, the connection is very easy. Jesus was the truth, Stephen declared the truth. Jesus performed signs, Stephen performed sings. They couldn’t argue with the wisdom of Jesus or Stephen, They plotted to kill Jesus and Stephen because of what they said, they lined up people to lie about Jesus and Stephen to convict them, they dragged Jesus and Stephen before the sanhedrin, Jesus said you will see the son of God at the right hand of God and Stephen told them that he saw that very thing, Jesus said “Father forgive them” and Stephen said “Lord don’t hold this against them.”

Stephen lived WWJD. He imitated the life of Christ right up to his death. Now, that doesn’t really leave me with much comfort! If I’m going to model my life after the life of Christ is this what I can expect? Because that seems terrifying and there’s no comfort in that!

So where is the comfort? I think the comfort for us comes from verse 55. I asked a few people this week as I was finishing prepping for this sermon: I want you to picture Jesus right now. Where is Jesus right now? Close your eyes. Where is Jesus and what is He doing? Almost everyone I asked said something like “well he is at the right hand of God on the throne, or seated at the right hand of God.” Indeed we profess that in the apostles' creed. He is seated at the right hand of God the father almighty.

We think that because all through the NT, and in some prophecies in the OT, Jesus is described this way. Seated at the right hand of God the father almighty. However, there is only one verse that describes Him differently, and it is verse 55. “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” All of these texts say that Jesus will be or is seated beside God on His right hand. One verse describes him as standing. No one can exactly pinpoint the exact reason he is described as standing, but He is.Perhaps he is standing in defence of His servant. Perhaps he is standing as an encouragement for Stephen to finish the race, perhaps he is standing to receive Stephen into His presence as he surely will very shortly. We’re not sure of the exact reason that Jesus is standing in this moment instead of sitting, but what we do know is the immense comfort that Stephen would have received. In the face of death by stoning, and extremely painful and humiliating death, Stephen looks up and sees his savior STANDING beside the father. The high priest who is going to intercede with God on his behalf not seated but standing beside the throne of God.

This was a comfort Jesus didn’t receive on the Cross. Jesus when He looked up to the heavens said “God, why have you forsaken me!” Jesus looked up and there was no comfort as he died the sinner's death for you and for me to wipe away the debt of sin- to pay for the death that you and I deserve! He looked up to the heavens, no comfort was there. The comfort for us brothers and sisters is that, as we face challenges and difficulty for our faith, as we struggle in this life because we are servants of Christ, we can fix our eyes on things above not on earthly things, and there we can see an image of our Lord and savior; not a passive observer who doesn’t know or care about the needs of His children, not a cruel king unbothered by the suffering of His people. But rather, we fix our eyes on things above and we see Jesus, STANDING beside the throne of God. Brothers and sisters - what a comfort.