

Scriptures: Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10

## Saint Stephen

During the season of Easter we've been looking at things Peter said in the book of Acts, and in his first epistolary letter written to the churches in Asia Minor. Today's first Scripture lesson from Acts didn't have Peter as a person named in it. It was about the stoning of Saint Stephen the Martyr. Stephen was a diaconal minister in the church at Jerusalem, and was one of seven people who the apostles had entrusted with distributing food, clothing, and other needs to the people in the church. He shows up in Acts 6, and then most of Acts 7 is his history lesson of the Jewish people given to the Sanhedrin – the Jewish Supreme Court of the day. What we heard today was the outcome of his trial. They found him guilty of blasphemy and killed him.

Stephen is the first Christian martyr – or Christian to be killed for believing in Jesus Christ. Another important person in the ancient church also showed up there – “Meanwhile, the witnesses [these were the guys who were going to stone Stephen] laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul,” (Acts 7:58). Saul would eventually meet Jesus on the road to Damascus, and become Paul the Apostle, missionary to the Gentiles. It's funny the way our unpredictable God can use events, and other people, in our lives to redirect and deepen our faith in Him, isn't it?

Today's reading from 1 Peter also alludes to how, when we come into relationship with God through Jesus Christ, without exception He takes us as we are. But He loves us enough to not leave us there. This is the gist of the Wednesday night adult study we started at the beginning of Lent. Striving on to Christian perfection is no more, and no less, than us knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior – and then letting Him also be Lord of us. In doing so, He changes us into better bearers of His own Divine Image. Turn with me to 1 Peter 2:2-10, if you have your Bible or a Bible app handy. I'm reading from the New International Version this morning. **Read 1 Peter 2:2-10.**

## Crave Pure Spiritual Milk

Just prior to what we read in Peter's letter, he tells the ancient church to be holy. And he goes on to explain it to them. “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk,” (1 Pet. 2:2a), Peter says. Think about a baby – I mean an infant – with whom you've spent a lot of time. A little baby is totally dependent on its parents to care for it, and to nurture it. We've seen lots of babies here at New Hope over the years, haven't we? Think about how those babies act when they get hungry. They don't act like us when we get hungry. Our stomachs growl, and we may comment that we're hungry, but we can wait. When they're hungry, they demand immediate attention! They scream at the tops of their lungs until you give them their milk.

You know, in hindsight, we probably should have flip-flopped the Scriptures again and done this one on Mother's Day. Moms – you usually get stuck the most with feeding those infants – just because of the way God has designed our bodies. Next week we'll celebrate you during Sermon on the Steps with the kids. Peter doesn't tell us here to just grumble about "oh, I'm hungry," even though that's something we often do, especially when it pertains to the Church. You may have heard people at various times comment about "not being fed" at some church, or by some pastor. I've heard people say that before, and up to about two months or so ago, hearing it would have rubbed me the wrong way. What I'm trying to say is this: I've had to get a thicker skin, because people – even those closest to us – are going to let us down. They're going to disappoint us, and maybe even hurt us. Oftentimes it's a reciprocal thing – we let them down, too. We disappoint them, and may even unintentionally hurt them as well.

I suspect, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that often we're being offered food, but we just don't like that particular type. We're offered peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, when we'd rather have – maybe even expect to have – a porterhouse steak with a twice baked potato. Here in our country, where we have freedom of religion, it's relatively easy to church shop. People do it. We've got people here in church today who do it. I did it, too, once upon a time. And that's okay. You have to go where you're most comfortable – where you're most likely to let your guard down, and let God do the hard work of remolding your heart into the throne it's meant to be, for the Spirit of Christ to sit upon.

Peter tells us we should crave the pure spiritual milk – in other words, we should want it so badly that we'll scream and howl until we get it. So what is the spiritual milk he's referencing? Bible scholars suggest that Peter's talking about the Bible here. We should be plugged into that text every day of our lives. When you look at church history – the ancient church mothers and fathers spent an enormous amount of time in prayer while pouring over the Scriptures. The ancients were well-fed on spiritual food. Peter tells us why we need to do this, "so that by it you may grow up in your salvation now that you have tasted that the Lord is good," (verses 2b-3). Just doing it for an hour a week on Sunday morning isn't enough – that's starvation!

### **Taste and See that the Lord is Good!**

We do literally "taste and see that the Lord is good," every time we receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Through the Eucharist, Jesus Christ, God-in-the-flesh, reveals Himself to us in a tangible way. Through the celebration of the Last Supper, we see all the imagery Christ used on the night He was betrayed on our behalf. How He uses a couple very common things in that time and place – bread and wine – to represent His body, broken for us, and His blood, poured out for us and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Our Great Thanksgiving liturgy is a beautiful overview of history according to the Scriptures contained in the Old and the New Testaments – if we're tuned in and listening.

And here at New Hope, we change that Great Thanksgiving liturgy with each season of the Church year. Friends, if you are here each first Sunday of the month over the course of an entire year, you will hear the entire history of the ancient Church contained in the Bible through the liturgy we use during the Communion service. I've purposefully done this, because – like I told you back during Advent – the Church in America needs to get back to its roots. That's Jesus Christ. We do this by following the pattern we've seen throughout Church history.

It's interesting when you stop to think about the history of the Church. A massive overhaul happens roughly every five hundred years in it. The Church starts at Pentecost – when the Holy Spirit comes in Acts 2, roughly 30 AD. About four hundred years later, what happens? Constantine the Great makes Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Six hundred years later, the Great Schism splits the Church into Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic branches. Add another five hundred years to that, and we're around 1500. What happened in the 1500's? The Protestant Reformation in Europe, and the formation of the Church of England in Britain. The Church today is primed to shift into something new that only God alone can see. It's an exciting time for us to be alive, and to be in the Church!

In each of these five hundred year intervals, you had folks like us, looking at how the world was, looking at how things were going in the Church, and then who went back to the pattern of the ancient church with spiritual practices. Like the things John Wesley talked about – fasting, daily Scripture reading, daily prayer, participating in the “ordinances” or activities of the Church. Wesley never intended to start a new church – he wanted to call the Church of England back into spiritual formation and greater development of personal and social holiness.

We're the legacy of that call. Methodism, all the denominations that stem from his teaching, are the legacy of Wesley's call to personal and social holiness. And friends, you can't have personal holiness if you see our brothers and sisters beyond the walls as folks who don't deserve to have the same things that we have. You can't have personal holiness, while turning a blind eye to social holiness – even though that's what some folks try to do. It sets us up to be labeled with that “h” word that none of us like – “hypocrite.”

## **Social Holiness**

And pursuing social holiness – calling on our society to value all people, just as Jesus loves them all – that's not a popular thing to do, because our society bases itself upon an “us versus them” mindset. As the Church, we have a higher calling, to be in union with Christ. Peter says, “As you come to Him, the Living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ,” (verses 4-5). Jesus understands when

people reject us. When we look at Jesus in the gospels, we see people reject Him over and over.

He doesn't get mad about it – He just goes on doing what He needs to do. Through His death and resurrection, He becomes for us the foundation of our faith – the Cornerstone. When we let Him be Lord of us – not just our Savior, the whole world needs saved, but some of them won't let Him be Lord – when we let Him do that, He puts His own Spirit within us. He makes us living stones. He turns us into His representatives here below.

And then He builds us into His Church – His spiritual house. We're to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God, Peter tells us. What are those? Well, we have the usual things – giving our time, through volunteering. Giving our money through our tithes and offerings. Giving voice to the great things God through Jesus Christ has done in our lives. But – and this is generally where we fall short as Americans – we also have the social things. Do we turn a blind eye to the suffering in the world around us, or do we offer whatever help we can muster to help the suffering diminish, even if only momentarily?

Peter tells us, “For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious Cornerstone and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.’ Now to you who believe, this Stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The Stone the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone,’ and, ‘A Stone that causes people to stumble and a Rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for,” (verses 6-8). Jesus is our Cornerstone. There are a lot of people in the Church telling us, “Jesus wants you to do this, that, and the other thing,” or “If you want to stay true to Jesus, you have to do x, y, and z.”

### **Jesus Christ is the Fullness of Scripture**

Look friends, when we examine the whole of Scripture – Jesus is the fullness of it. He's what Scripture is all about. The Old Testament points us toward Him. The New Testament expounds on who He is. And the gospels show us what He did while He was doing His earthly ministry. So if we're following Jesus Christ with our whole hearts, we're going to do the things which Jesus does in the gospels. He brings healing to people. He feeds people. He brings people back to life. He welcomes the outcast. He genuinely loves people – and with no expectation of them giving Him anything in return.

This next weekend I'll be wrapping up another class in the course of study, the on-going courses I am required to complete to continue being licensed as a local pastor here.

The course topic has been on spiritual formation. I hope you've noticed some positive changes in some of what we're doing here in our corporate worship time together. We're including more time for silent prayer and contemplation. We'll do that again, momentarily as we prepare to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We're gradually getting back to our roots. We're going back into those ancient patterns of our forefathers and foremothers in the faith. Why are we doing this? Because, friends, we've lost our way.

We've turned faith and faith formation into a private thing. We operate with an emphasis on "me." Robert Mulholland, in his book, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*, writes, "Spiritual formation is a process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others."<sup>1</sup> In the grand scheme of things, it isn't about us – yes, we change, we grow – but it's about reaching out in service to others.

This is what the Church needs to be doing. See, Peter tells us, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy," (verses 9-10). We're called to be changed into better image-bearers of Christ, for the sake of others – or as the United Methodist mission statement says – for the transformation of the world. We're called to lead other beggars looking for bread, to the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Prayer:** Risen Christ, You prepare a place for us, in the home of the Father of us all. Draw us more deeply into Yourself, through Scripture read, water splashed, bread broken, wine poured, so that when our hearts are troubled, we will know You more completely as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016, page 16.