

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



Text: Acts 6 & 7, Psalm 139

Theme: Silence is safe. Speaking the truth can be dangerous.

Subject: The cost of discipleship

Title: *Memory Keepers*

Jonathan Eidson

Can you imagine the despair that surrounded him like a thick cloud? The angry mob had accomplished its goal and had moved on, leaving Stephen's lifeless body behind. I wonder what the widows who had been beneficiaries of Stephen's ministry thought when they heard about his death. Surely they felt helpless and hopeless. Stephen had suddenly become the first Christian martyr and this was nothing to celebrate. I don't like it at all-do you? I don't like it because the story draws me in and I really have to think about its implications but I don't want to think about it that. Everyday, we are bombarded with stories and images of death to the point that we're almost numb to it. Unless it involves someone we know, we hardly notice it. It's impossible *not* to notice martyrs though. Even the word "*martyr*" with its odd spelling makes you do a double take.

Amy told us last week that she likes to preach the "*feel good*" sermon and so do I. I love a Disney ending; now *that's* a "feel good" ending. I don't like seeing movies with sad endings and I can usually tell from the review which ones should be avoided. Occasionally though, one sneaks by and as the movie goes along, I find myself looking at my watch, leaning over to Anne and saying, "I'm not sure there's enough time left for this thing to end positively."

It's probably not surprising that some of us have avoided the story of Stephen whenever possible. The ending is part of it, but it's also a gruesome scene to imagine. I'd much rather plant an

image in my mind of stoning the way A. J. Jacobs describes it in his book, The Year of Living Biblically. Jacobs, a not-particularly-religious person of Jewish descent, found himself wondering if it's possible to really take the Bible literally. He tried it for a year and describes the experience in his book, which I highly recommend. Stoning is second on his list of the most perplexing religious laws. Still, he decides he must stone someone but at the same time, he doesn't want to actually *hurt* the person. He finds a loophole in that the Bible doesn't specify the size of stone. So he decides to use pebbles. His first plan is to pass a man he has identified as a Sabbath breaker and nonchalantly throw the pebbles at the small of his back. When this doesn't work, he decides to try again. The next time an opportunity presents itself, he is in a park relaxing when a man looks at him and tells him he's dressed kind of weird. They begin talking and Jacobs tells the man he is dressed *weirdly* because he is trying to live by the Bible- following the ten commandments, only wearing certain kinds of fabric, not shaving his beard, stoning adulterers and so forth. The man says, "well, I'm an adulterer, are you going to stone me?" Jacobs says, "If I could, yeah, that'd be great." The man says, "I'll punch you in the face. I'll send you to the cemetery." Jacobs shows the man the small pebbles and says, "I wouldn't use large stones. It would be these small pebbles." He says the man reached out quickly and grabbed one of the pebbles and threw it at Jacobs' face. Jacobs, remembering an eye for an eye, threw a pebble and hit the man in the chest. The man said, "I'm gonna knock you in the kisser!" Jacobs said, "well, you really shouldn't commit adultery" and then both men stared at each other for ten seconds until the man brushed past him and walked away.¹ I'd much rather picture stoning as something funny like that but the story of Stephen won't let me. He was murdered by a mob in an agonizingly slow and painful way as those in power looked on in satisfaction.

Last week, Amy told us about Shiphrah and Puah and the courageous way they defied Pharaoh. What they did certainly took courage but remembering their story this week as I thought about

Stephen, I found myself identifying much more closely with Shiphrah and Puah. While they were risking their lives by defying Pharaoh and refusing to kill the newborn Hebrew males, they were also clever and deceptive in their response to his question of why they had allowed the babies to live. Their response shifted the blame away from them in an attempt to avoid retribution. It was *mostly* true but it was also like the stories some of us told as children to try and stay out of trouble. It's much easier to model us after Shiphrah and Puah, courageous as they were, than to follow in the steps of someone like Stephen.

Stephen was different. In his observations about martyrs, Edward Markquart gives several common characteristics to consider that apply here. First, martyrs are killed not because of their convictions but because they express those convictions. Although these faithful followers cannot see the future to know that they will become martyrs, they surely believe that keeping silent, compromising their beliefs or renouncing Christ would produce far more anguish in their souls than the wrath of any persecutor.

Second, martyrs are willing to switch from the third person to the second person. From the “*they*” to the “*you*.” In the 7th chapter of Acts, Stephen responds to the accusations of those who *falsely* claim that he “speaks blasphemous words against Moses and God.” Stephen is described as one “full of grace and power” and, like many faithful followers of Christ, would not consider shrinking in the face of grave danger. As he began his speech, even the corrupt council that grilled him “saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” He eloquently spoke with great reverence and knowledge of God’s covenant with Israel that was renewed again and again. He told the story of the faithful who did not turn from God—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon. And he recited the other part of the story; the recurring theme of the Israelites who turned from God generation after generation. Then, in verse 51, he makes the change from “*they*” to “*you*.” *You* stiff necked people.

You hard hearted people. *You* people with wax in your ears. *You* people who betrayed Jesus. *You* people who killed Jesus. *You* people who worship your religious traditions. *You* Jesus killers! How often do we listen for the things we disagree with instead of for the things with which we agree?

There was plenty for the council to agree with in Stephen's statement but they weren't really listening until his words concerning the past became words concerning the present. The pronoun "you" can be a powerful word and the truth can be hard to swallow.

Third, it's not just what martyrs say but when and where they say it. Martyrs aren't concerned with public opinion polls.² They don't check to see if they are with like-minded people. They say what they believe without concern for who might hear it. Frightening as it may sound, wouldn't you love to have that kind of courage? I believe Davidson pastor James Howell is correct in his assertion that "people in all generations are strangely hungry for a treasure so precious that death itself is not too high a price to pay to possess it."³ (Read that quote twice it's powerful)

This leads to a fourth characteristic: martyrs are willing to die.⁴ That doesn't mean they want to die, but living what they believe is more important than any consequence. It's important to remember, however, that simply being willing to die for a cause is not enough. If that were true, terrorists and Crusaders could be considered martyrs. In contrast, martyrs do not impose their beliefs upon others with violence or coercion. Listen carefully to Howell, who notes the irony of the common practice in Christianity's early days of murdering believers in front of a huge crowd, "The fact that martyrdom was usually a public show was crucial. The Romans thought of gladiator fights as part dissuasion, part entertainment. But making a spectacle of a Christian leader, intended as a deterrent, merely exposed the barbarity of Roman culture and gave voice to a faith that did not shrink, even from a gruesome death. Christians were peaceful, attacking no one. Sham trials proved the guilt not of the

Christian to be martyred but of those who would cruelly inflict undeserved punishment on innocent victims.’’⁵

I think it’s a safe bet we won’t be seeing a Disney movie about the life of Stephen, the first martyr of Christ. The ending just doesn’t meet Disney’s requirements but while it is tragic, it doesn’t end there. The message of the story is one we need to remember.

When I began to read about Stephen to prepare for today, I looked up martyr in the dictionary. Webster defines it this way: 1) One who chooses to die rather than renounce religious principles; and 2) One who suffers much or makes great sacrifices in order to advance a belief, cause or principle.⁶ The Russ Dean dictionary, which, I like to call “Deansters”, would add that it’s from the Greek word martyrea, which also means “witness.” We’re called to be witnesses but I think many of us today have become private about our faith. We have religious freedom and yet we don’t want to talk about religion outside the safety of our own community and sometimes it’s not considered politically correct to talk about it there. Perhaps just as Stephen was a “memory keeper” for the story of God’s faithfulness throughout history, we are called to be memory keepers of those who have kept the faith at great cost. Who knows how much Stephen’s witness affected Saul, who was an observer and supporter of those who stoned Stephen, and later changed from persecutor of Christians to a follower of Christ? Maybe Stephen’s message to us is to be witnesses of the faith for which he was willing to die. We may be planting seeds of faith without even realizing it. The question is, “are we willing to hear, internalize and express that message?” How can we be witnesses? I serve on the Outreach Committee and for several years, we’ve wrestled with that question. Most church outreach committees are about turning churches into larger churches. Our committee hasn’t been about growth for the sake of numbers, which to us seems shallow. At the same time, we recognize that what we’ve found here, in this community of faith, is worth telling others about. We are challenged to bear

witness to the transforming power of God's love and covenant with us. We must resist the urge to keep quiet out of fear that we will be mistaken as those who seek high enrollment figures or those who push their beliefs upon others. And we are challenged to reflect upon our core beliefs, upon the ways we have been transformed as we have followed Jesus and his call to us today. This was not an impromptu sermon that Stephen pulled out of a hat. It was a reflection of the life he lived. Let us consider our own reflection and live in a way that finds us faithful.

¹ The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible, by A. J. Jacobs, Simon & Schuster, October 9, 2007.

² "The Martyrs and St. Stephen," Rev. Edward F. Markquart, Sermons from Seattle, December 26.

³ Servants, Misfits and Martyrs: Saints and Their Stories, by James C. Howell, Upper Room Books, 1999.

⁴ Markquart.

⁵ Howell, p.

⁶ Webster's II New College Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.

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I must also add thanks to Lorie Gabriel and David Gindra and their accompanists, Susan Gindra on organ and Anne Hunter Eidson on flute. Their duet on *Pie Jesu* by Andrew Lloyd Webber prepared the congregation and me like nothing else could have.