

“A Cornerstone,” Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; 4/20/08; Albany UMC

The early church was on fire. First of all, they loved to meet; whenever they met together they prayed. If we look up Acts 1:14, it says that “they all came together regularly to pray.” There were men and women, young and old, together. Church happens when we like to meet. We meet days and nights; we pray and study together; we grow spiritually and have compassion for each other. That is where church not only happens but it gets strong. That’s exactly what happened in Jerusalem church. They loved to meet; whenever they met they prayed hard. When they prayed hard, the Spirit of God filled them and they brought people to Christ.

Stephen was not a disciple. He was not one of those twelve guys hand-picked by Jesus. He was one of the deacons appointed by Jesus’ disciples when the Jerusalem church became large and there was too much to do; the idea was to let these seven deacons take charge of some of administrative and social work within the congregation so that the disciples could spend more time praying and preaching which was more like their original duty. So Stephen was one of those deacons in the church taking care of a lot of business. But Stephen was multi-talented; on top of his duty as a deacon, he was also a preacher. In fact, he was one of the best preachers in the church. Being so good and very prophetic, he was recorded as the first person who was killed on his mission of preaching. Among the charges against Stephen was the accusation that he spoke "against the holy place" and that, he said, "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place" (Acts 6:13-14).

A place is important. We humans cherish places; the place of our birth, place of childhood, place of baptism, place of marriage, place of education, and so forth. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Jews, people of Stephen’s time in Jerusalem, considered their temple as one of the most holy places. But as some of them do now, the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism went a little too far. They had become increasingly "place-

conscious," provincial and localized in its view of God. Jerusalem and the temple in particular had come to be looked upon as the only places where God could be found. God's presence was pretty much restricted to Jerusalem or even to the temple.

To Stephen, it was not the place but right faith that God was looking for from people; Stephen went on to say that although King Solomon built and dedicated a pretty temple to God, God would not be present there if people worshipping there were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ear. It was quite a huge challenge to the people! But Stephen's point was not to judge or denounce them but to let them know about Jesus.

Even though it is not in the text, his message was to say "Repent! Come sinners, Jesus died for me and you!" God gave you the law through Moses but you did not keep it; you did not love God or your neighbors as yourselves; you killed Jesus who came to teach you just that! So come and repent! God will forgive you! God will give you a second chance!

But the text says they were terribly enraged and began gnashing their teeth at him. Eventually they rushed to him and stoned him to death. And here comes the highest moment of the text: while he is being stoned and killed, Stephen is saying a prayer to God: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Wait a minute. He is asking God to forgive them while they are killing him? Wow, how can you do this? That really surprised me when I read. We talk about love; we talk about forgiveness all the time. But how can you do this? I know Jesus did it too; but Stephen was not Jesus. How could he do that?

Talk is cheap. Sometimes sermons can be cheap too. I know that. Some people told me, "Oh, you are a teacher of preaching! Writing sermons are nothing!" Well, I wish that was true! But I can tell you now: Saturdays are always hell to me. It was like that when I began

some 20 years ago and it is like that now. It never gets easy to get up here and talk about the Gospel.

The reason why proclaiming the Gospel is not easy is that you do not just want to say things; you want to say things that matter to you personally. You want to show your people that what you say is what you really believe! You want to dig deeper so that your honesty and integrity come out of what you say. That way you as a human being come closer to God and lay down your weakness and your unbelief. That way you encounter not only His presence but his confirmation of love and mercy yourself.

It is a hard job. But I love it. Each time I read and struggle with the text, I know I have to dig deeper in asking myself if I really believe this. I ask myself if I really mean it; if I want to live what I say. In that respect, I asked myself this time if I could forgive others if they were to kill me. That was hard!

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” As a human being, not the son of man like Jesus, how could Stephen do it? When I was working on this sermon, I asked the same question over and over. I just could not pass this verse.

Forgiveness; it is a tough business. We are “hard-wired” not to forgive when we have been hurt by another person. Our pride or self-esteem is injured. Our expectations or dreams are disappointed. We lose something very valuable to us. We want compensation for the damage.

But one thing is clear from the text. To Stephen, his act of forgiving was a gift he received from his encounter with Jesus. He did what he did because he was in prayer even in the moment of death. He did what he did because his Spirit-filled eyes saw the glory of God. He did what he did because he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. It was not him but the grace of God that led him to what he did. He did forgive his killers because his heart was full of joy even in

dying. Even Jesus was surprised; so he could not sit on his chair in heaven; he was standing to welcome this man of God. Forgiving is hard. This is something we cannot do alone. We need help; we need God's grace and mercy. Loving is hard; we need God's love first. You can't give others unless you have and taste for yourself.

But God gave us this love through Jesus. He gave us enough. The problem is we do not have enough; we run out; we are drained; we are just exhausted. But God wants to give us more always. What we need is prayer; what we need is coming to Him; what we need is giving ourselves in; and inviting Him in ourselves. God not only forgives us but He also gives us the gift of forgiving.

The text from 1 Peter this morning talks about the word "cornerstone"; it says that Jesus was a stone rejected by people but he became the cornerstone of the church selected by God—the reason was that Jesus was obedient to the will of God. And Peter is asking us to become living stones in our church; he wants us to be bricks that make the church. For that, we need to be bonded together; we need to be glued together by the love of God. We need to be agents of forgiving others; we need to be those who make the world surprised.

Forgiveness surprises people. Stephen really surprised the world of his time following the example of Jesus and put a mark of Jesus on his church. He was a cornerstone of his church.

God surely wants to see the same mark of forgiving each another on ourselves as individuals and as a church as well. Forgiveness is the cornerstone of our hope and life in this world. Amen.