

“Forgiving and Forgiven”

The story of St. Stephen, deacon and martyr of the Church, is a tragic one. It is full of misunderstanding, ecstasy, anger, passion, hypocrisy, and love. One aspect that may get overlooked is forgiveness. Stephen’s forgiveness of his tormenters and killers, and God’s forgiveness of a character on the sidelines, Saul of Tarsus, Pharisee and persecutor of the nascent Jesus Movement, whom God would choose to become the great evangelist of that same movement after changing his name to Paul.

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things Jesus calls us to do. It seems diametrically opposed to our human instincts. In the face of insult or injury, we want retribution, some sort of payback in order to get even with the other. The balance of power is out of kilter if we cannot get revenge. Also, if we don’t get vengeance, we are seen as weak and vulnerable. We become a prime target for additional hurt from the same person. Others also may see us as weak and an easy mark. Turning the other cheek may be Christian, but it is not innately human. That is why those who do are called weaklings, sissies, and wimps. Those names can hurt as much as the original pain. (Whoever said “words can never hurt me” was not on the receiving end of viscous taunting.)

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we meet Stephen one of the first deacons of the Church. The deacons were a group of people whose responsibility was to take care of those in need e.g. widows, children, orphans, the poor, the ill, destitute, hungry and so forth. Modern deacons like Deacon Tim Leighton who was with us last week, have similar responsibilities. The Apostles created this group because they felt they did not have time enough to preach the Gospel and provide care for all who were in need.

Stephen is not being persecuted for being a deacon, but rather for being a follower of Jesus. We might ask what could be such a big deal about being a follower of Jesus? The religious authorities considered the things he was saying as blasphemous. We are so used to religion being the point of jokes, parodies, cartoons, movies, sacrilegious books, etc. that we might not think a thing of what Stephen was saying. I would hope that if someone came into our midst saying he could see God and Jesus at his right hand that we would do something other than decide to kill him. But that is what this group of religious leaders decided needed to be done. Stephen had spoken sacrilegiously about God and other sacred things so he must die.

St. Luke who wrote the Book of Acts goes to great lengths to make it clear that Stephen is not a blasphemer. Stephen is painted as pious, mystical, and gentle. During his trial and execution his words echo the words of Jesus. In The Gospel of Luke Jesus says that “From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.”¹ In Acts 7:56 Stephen says “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” When Jesus is dying on the cross he says “Father into your hands I commend

¹ Luke 22:69

my spirit.”² While in Acts Stephen says “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”³ Just before he dies Stephen says, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”⁴ That is similar to Jesus’ cry from the cross, “Father, forgive them: for they do not know what they are doing.”⁵ From these similarities in speech we know that Luke feels that Stephen is righteous and not a blasphemer. He is one who has learned to emulate Jesus in his words and actions even to the ultimate example of forgiving the people who are killing him. His last living act.

St. Stephen like Jesus is our example of forgiveness. I think of all the little bumps and bruises we receive in life, of all of the insults and injuries, and of the truly despicable names we are called and shame that is put on our backs. As long as we refuse to forgive even the least of these we are carrying the weight of them. I guarantee you that very few who have hurt you are carrying even a fraction of that weight. If they did they would be asking for forgiveness from you.

We are called to forgive and to ask for forgiveness. I think of how many people advocate for gratitude journals, wherein we are to keep a record of that for which we are thankful. I think we could all use a forgiveness journal as well. In such a journal we would record whom we need to forgive and of whom we need to ask forgiveness. In the same way we need to realize and recognize the gifts we are given, we also need to recognize when we hurt others and require forgiveness and others who may need forgiveness from us.

As Henri-Frédéric Amiel wrote, “Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.” If we can end our day with words of forgiveness and repentance on our lips I expect we will sleep more peacefully knowing our intentions for the next day and every day are for love, forgiveness and kindness. Let us learn from St. Stephen who in the face of a hard and unforgiving world, with his last breath forgave all who meant him harm. Let his martyrdom teach us the way of love even in the face of so much hardship in this broken world.

² Luke 23:46

³ Acts 7:59

⁴ Acts 7:60

⁵ Luke 23:34