

Ac 6, 7:54-60
 22 May 2011
 5th Sunday of Easter

“We are All Witnesses”

For those familiar with the National Basketball Association and a certain player named LeBron James, my sermon title may remind you of something. It’s part of an ad campaign that Nike started a few years ago. Plenty of TV commercials have ensued since then.

Here’s something from 2007. “The Witness campaign pays tribute to James and acknowledges the legions of fans worldwide who are ‘witnessing’ his greatness, power, athleticism and beautiful style of play. The campaign was first introduced in November 2005 with the unveiling of a 110-foot high by 212-foot wide billboard located adjacent to Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland. The campaign has continued to live through fans in Cleveland and around the world donning ‘Witness’ t-shirts and bearing ‘Witness’ placards.”¹

If you were to ask American fans of all sports to name some athletes that might be put on the list of “disliked,” LeBron James would probably be included—especially by fans of the Cleveland Cavaliers, his now **former** team. A variety of reasons would be offered: he’s arrogant, greedy, etc. (By the way, I don’t have any ill-will toward the guy.)

But we are all witnesses!

A fellow who learns about being a witness the tough way is the subject of Acts 6 and 7: Stephen. When I say he learns about being a witness the tough way, I’m including the Greek word for “witness,” *μαρτυς* (*martus*), where we get our word “martyr.” It’s the same word. I must say, getting executed by stoning is a **tiny** bit worse than getting booed while playing basketball!

Our lectionary text for today is chapter 7, verses 55 to 60; I added verse 54. Still, starting at the point where people are already infuriated with Stephen doesn’t seem logical! Chapter 6 provides some badly-needed background. We need to know how we got to this place—why he’s been dragged before the Council, the Sanhedrin. Why have charges been brought in the first place?

But before we do that, here are some comments on how Stephen is dispatched. His claim that he sees the heavens opened, with the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, is what **really** does it. That’s the final straw. His accusers cover their ears to prevent hearing any more blasphemy.

The presence of “witnesses” in verse 58 might suggest that they’ve been following legal procedures. Deuteronomy 17 requires, “On the evidence of two or three witnesses the death sentence shall be executed; a person must not be put to death on the evidence of only one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty” (vv. 6-7). The fact that we’ve already learned in chapter 6 that these are **false** witnesses undermines the credibility of this hearing.

¹ www.nba.com/cavaliers/news/witnesses_070606.html

There are some obvious parallels to the treatment of Jesus. False witnesses were also brought in to testify against him. In both cases, their testimony is disregarded when Jesus and Stephen seem to utter blasphemy. Stephen copies the behavior of Jesus when he cries out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (vv. 59-60).

There’s the terrible irony of false witnessing against a true witness, who becomes a martyr. (Again, it’s all the same word.) Now, how does this insanity come about?

We need to remember that, at this point in time, those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah are still recognized as Jewish. They consider **themselves** to be good Jews. That’s true for those who are born Jewish, and for those who are Jewish converts. The split between the faiths doesn’t happen for a few more decades.

The stage is set in chapter 6. We’re told that there’s a quarrel between the Greek-speaking Jews (also called “the Hellenists”) and the Hebrew-speaking Jews. The Hellenists are complaining that their widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. This argument isn’t something that just happened overnight. The tension between Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking Jews has its origin centuries in the past.

Almost four hundred years earlier, Alexander the Great led his Greek army throughout the Middle East. Eventually, the Jews, along with a bunch of other nations, were ruled by the Greeks. Like so many other conquerors, the Greeks imposed their culture and language on the people they governed. There were both good and bad things about that.

The Jewish religion was forever altered by the Greeks. One of the very **good** things about it was the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. This became the Bible of the early church. Because Greek was so widely understood, it greatly helped in bringing the word of God to vast numbers of people. The Greek language was a very good tool in evangelizing.

Of course, it’s easy to see that if you’re looking back in time. When you’re in the midst of the culture, it can be very difficult to sort out what’s useful from what’s useless—what’s helpful from what’s harmful. For example, in their case, it can be tempting to disrespect that Greek-speaking Jew as someone impure or unclean. Come on, let’s face it: no **real** Jew speaks Greek!

We are all witnesses. It’s just that sometimes it can be tough to figure out what it is that we’re witnessing!

The apostles understand that what might seem to be a simple problem—taking care of the widows—can easily escalate, given the history. So they call a congregational meeting and say, “Friends, we’ve got to work this thing out!” They decide to find “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” who can handle the problem (v. 3). The apostles feel that they shouldn’t neglect their duty to the word of God “in order to wait on tables,” or as the Good News Bible puts it, “to handle finances” (v. 2).

This is where Stephen enters the picture. And **very** quickly, to come full circle: Stephen irritates some people; they wind up bringing false charges, and he’s on the verge of capital punishment. I suppose it would be easy to say, “How barbaric! Killing someone over a religious disagreement.” Of course, it’s only been a couple of centuries

since **we** did that—at least, officially. And then, sometimes we **symbolically** throw stones.

Last week, we noted a change that will be coming to our Presbyterian *Book of Order*. Talk about throwing stones! This has been a bone of contention for decades, and I imagine it will continue to be. I'm referring to the vote that replaced a key paragraph on ordination.

This is the current language: "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."

This is the new language: "Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation. Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."

A frequent complaint of those opposed to the change is that it waters down the standards for ordination. I realize that this amendment is usually framed as being about ordaining people who are gay. Still, when I voted for it, I found the text to be far from watered down. To me, submitting "joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life" is very powerful language. I see it as an **even higher** standard. I understand that some people will choose to interpret that in whatever way they want, but then, the same thing happens with the Bible.

I fully realize that not everyone here agrees with me on this. I may even be in the minority. I respect that. Even my dear old mom is of a different mind from me on this one! We had an hour-long phone call about this.

I can't ignore the scriptures that portray homosexuality in a bad light. I won't pretend that they aren't there. At the same time, there are also scriptures (in both Old and New Testaments) that tolerate—or even require—oppression of women and suppression of those with certain physical deformities and illness. There are scriptures that tolerate or require slavery and genocide!

I love the Bible, and I also recognize how it demonstrates the ongoing revelation of God's light and love. We see that already **within** its pages, as the Hebrew prophets yearn for a deeper faith than that found at the level of sacrificing animals and attending worship services. We see Jesus and the apostles finding "clean" what before had been considered "unclean."

And for the faithful far removed from that time, the Spirit continues to give new insights into the written word. Relying on the Living Word, the scriptures again come to life. We have to learn, over and over again, the difficult path of love. And that learning includes—because the world so desperately needs to see this in us—love when we disagree. **Especially** when we disagree!

I think if we're honest with each other, we've all gone down the path of throwing stones. I know I've hurled some rocks more often than I'd care to recall. And I've needed to be reminded that I've done so while dwelling in a house made of glass. Maybe I've had my hand in creating some martyrs. Friends, that is **not** the way we're called to be witnesses!

To submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life is a difficult thing—regardless of the current issue. For Stephen, it's not just about his language; there's something else. It's the fact that he's part of that darn group who keep insisting that Jesus has risen from the grave! And he just won't shut up about it!

To underline the point, we're told that, while Stephen is being interrogated, everyone "saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (6:15). The late F. F. Bruce quotes in his book on Acts: "This was 'not the mild, gentle look that is often seen in paintings of angels; not the fierce look of an avenging angel, but a look that told of inspiration within, clear eyes burning with the inner light.'"²

We can witness as Stephen does, not only at his moment of death, but in his exuberant affirmation of life—his affirmation of life in Christ. We can let the stones fall from our hands and remember that we are all witnesses.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 136.