

May 14, 2017  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
Acts 7:55-60

## The Difficult Work of Forgiveness

As Christians, we are called to do difficult things. Last week, we talked about how we are called to share as the church; and how the very first church shared everything with one another. And how they did it with glad and generous hearts. We know it's not easy to share like that. And yet that is what we are called to do. Today, another not-so-easy thing is set before us. A VERY difficult thing that is also VERY much a part of who we are as Christians. And that is the work of forgiveness.

Now forgiveness is something we talk about a lot in church. We say the word a lot. We hear the word a lot. We notice that Jesus mentions forgiveness a lot when he is teaching his disciples. He tells them constantly that forgiveness is something they should practice. "Love your enemies, he says. Pray for your persecutors Forgive one another repeatedly, one or two or seven times, but, up to seven multiplied by seventy times. Pray: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

And those last words of Jesus from the cross –"Father, forgive them, for

they know not what they do”. We have to learn to forgive if we follow Jesus. It is an essential part of who we are in Christ.

Our story today from the book of Acts is about what that forgiveness looks like and what it will require of us. Our scripture reminds us that forgiveness is not just a churchy word we throw around. It is something we must live out in the face of extreme opposition and terrifying violence. Today Stephen shows us what it looks like as he faces his enemies. And speaks the truth to them. And prays for them. And with his last breath, forgives them. This, **THIS**, says our scripture reading, is what we are called to do.

But forgiveness is hard. The forgiveness that Stephen demonstrated in the face of anger and fear can seem utterly impossible. And the thing is, is that Stephen wasn't even supposed to be where he was in our story today. He wasn't supposed to be speaking out against the Jewish authorities. He wasn't supposed to getting in trouble debating theology with them. He was supposed to be doing the dishes. He was supposed to be serving meals to the widows and orphans. He was supposed to a diakonos, or deacon in the church. But when the disciples commissioned

Stephen and laid hands on him, the Spirit, that wild Holy Spirit, had other plans. And Stephen started doing signs and wonders. He started proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus to everyone. And I mean everyone. He was preaching to the Jews about how they had misunderstood Jesus. And how the Law of Moses and the prophets and all of the Bible pointed to Jesus. And they had failed to see it. His Jewish brothers had failed to recognize God at work in Jesus Christ. Stephen was just supposed to be waiting tables. But there he was telling his enemies how they were wrong. How they were wrong for what they did to Jesus. How they were wrong for handing him over to be crucified. How they were wrong for persecuting his church.

Stephen was just supposed to be waiting tables. He was just supposed to be doing clean-up work in the fellowship hall. He wasn't supposed to be out there, preaching about God overcoming our hatred with love, overcoming our Good Friday with Easter Sunday. That wasn't Stephen's job. Maybe sometimes we feel that way ourselves, that it's not our job to be out talking to our enemies. We are supposed to be in the kitchen. We are supposed to be in the background. We are just babies in the faith. We

aren't grown-up enough to be like Stephen, to be a saint or superhero of faith. To speak the truth in front of others. That's not us. And technically it wasn't supposed to be Stephen either. It shouldn't have been required of him. And yet, it was. Stunning forgiveness WAS what was required. Like it is required of all of Jesus' disciples. So Stephen shows us that we need to be prepared because we may find ourselves where we never expected to be. We may find ourselves having to love our enemies and praying for our persecutors and forgiving them as we have been forgiven. Just like Jesus taught us to. Like just Jesus himself practiced. Forgiveness is difficult work. But as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said, "We aren't meant to be the tail lights of a society accustomed to violence and rage, we are to be the headlights, leading others to a higher level of justice."<sup>1</sup>

Stephen was just supposed to be waiting tables. But he ended up being a light in the world. He ended up illuminating others about what it means to love God and love your neighbor. In a world full of anger and division

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter From The Birmingham Jail" April 16, 1963

and violence, we are called to be the headlights, not the taillights of society. We are called to show forgiveness. To pray for our enemies. To offer grace--because we KNOW about grace. Because we KNOW about mercy. Because we KNOW God has given us what we don't deserve, so we must give it when others don't deserve it either. We KNOW God's forgiveness and it has changed us. And we believe it can change the world.

But forgiveness is difficult. And we have to be prepared. We need to be ready at all times to forgive. Even if we don't feel up to it. Even if we hadn't planned on it; we are supposed to do it anyway. We are supposed to be the headlights of society instead of the taillights. And being ready means being ready to speak the truth about the wrong we see, like Stephen. We have to be ready to talk to those we don't agree with, instead of being silent. We have to be ready to speak up when we know something isn't true instead of saying nothing and stewing about it.

Stephen had to speak. He had to tell the Jewish leaders that it was wrong to kill Jesus. Even if they thought they were doing the right thing. It was wrong to attack him. It was wrong to crucify him. Instigating violence

does not please God. Sponsoring death is NOT God's way. Stephen had to speak up. So how can we speak up?

I heard an amazing story the other day about forgiveness. It involved some kids from our youth group. I'll call them Linda and Josie. Linda and Josie and some of the kids were talking about home schooling in casual conversation. And Linda said she thought homeschooling was silly. That it was for weird families and strange kids and people who were antisocial. Linda didn't know it, but Josie was homeschooled. And Josie was really hurt by what Linda had said. And Josie went home and told her mom about it. And Josie's mom could have gotten offended and she could have told Josie to never speak to Linda again and to quit going to youth group, but Josie's mom did something really brave. She said: Well, Josie, you can do one of two things, you can talk to your youth leaders about this and they can help you OR you can call Linda yourself and sort this out. So Josie did something brave herself. Instead of staying silent and sulking and badmouthing Linda to others, she called Linda. And she told her the truth. She said, "Your comments really hurt me. I'm homeschooled and my family isn't weird and we aren't antisocial

and I'm really not THAT strange. What you said about homeschooling, it isn't true for my family at all." And then Linda did something brave. Instead of getting defensive and angry about being called out, she apologized. Linda told Josie she was sorry, that her big mouth had gotten the better of her and she had spoken without thinking. And she hoped that Josie would forgive her. And guess what? Josie did. It was amazing. Josie and Linda, two middle school kids, were able to do something that few grown-ups are brave enough to do. They were able to practice forgiveness.

We must be prepared to forgive. We must be brave enough to speak up for what we know to be true. And most importantly, we have to pray. When Stephen was surrounded by his enemies, he prayed. He stopped. He refocused. He tuned his heart into God and set his mind on what was above. He looked for strength beyond his own strength. For perspective beyond his own perspective. Because forgiveness is hard. It isn't something we can do on our own. It's something we need God's help with. Stephen prays and his prayer is one we should keep close to us and practice over and over again: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

I want you to think of someone who has sinned against you. Someone who has hurt you. Or betrayed you. Or offended you. Or disappointed you. Someone you have a hard time trusting or even liking. Now think about the energy you spend on them. And the conversations you've had with them in your head. And how none of that has fixed anything. And how none of it has made more space for grace or peace in your life. How you've tried with your own strength to overcome those against you. Now-- try God's strength: Pray. Instead of thinking negative, pray positive. Pray for your enemy to have joy. Pray for them to experience goodness. Pray for them: that whatever pain they have, that it may be healed. That instead of not receiving mercy, that they may receive God's mercy. Because isn't more mercy what we need? Isn't it what the world needs according to Jesus?

Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Do not hold it and do not let US hold it. Do not let us hold on to a record of wrong. Let it go. Do not hold on to what they said or what they did. Let it go. Do not hold on to the injury and make it the story of your life. Let it go. Do not hold on to the transgression, telling all your neighbors about how they did you wrong.

Let it go. Do not hold on to hatred and bitterness in your heart. Let them go. Because it will not hurt them, it will only hurt you. Resentment and anger will not take their joy, but it will take yours. Think about those who have hurt you or offended you. Those who owe you a debt or at least an apology. And pray for what they owe to be forgiven.

Forgiveness is difficult. It takes practice, lots of practice for the way of Jesus to be our way. Sometimes it seems impossible to love our enemies or pray for our persecutors. But Stephen challenges us today. He challenges us to be the church that follows Jesus. To speak the truth and pray and finally to believe that forgiveness can change people. Because it does. In our story, today, we hear about the mob that comes after Stephen to stone him. The mob is full of hatred and murderous rage and in that mob, holding everyone's coats, is Saul. And he approves of this violence. And he will go from here out to hunt the followers of Jesus and drag them off to prison.

This Saul, who is he? Saul, this righteous, coat holder, who will he become? He will become the apostle Paul. The greatest missionary in the world for the church of Jesus Christ. The greatest preacher of God's

grace to the undeserving. If it weren't for Paul, we wouldn't be here. But that is God's way; that's what the wild Holy Spirit of God is up to, taking God's worst enemies and making him into God's best friends. That's what our God does. And we believe that God can do that with anyone. That's what we hope. That's what we believe. That God redeems enemies instead of destroying them.

Forgiveness is difficult. But it is the work we are called to do as the church of Jesus Christ. We are called to be the headlights for peace and mercy instead of the taillights of anger and vengeance. To speak up for what we know to be true. To pray for our enemies and our persecutors. To let go of sins instead of holding on to them. To believe mercy is God's way. And that forgiveness changes people; that forgiveness changes the world.

1 Peter 2:2-10

2Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — 3if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 5like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6For it stands in scripture:

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

7To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the very head of the corner,”

8and

“A stone that makes them stumble,  
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

10 Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God’s people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

—Forgiving—Forgiveness is hard.

Stephen is our example. It requires not holding something against someone,  
it requires perspective—they had a bad day/life, it’s not about me,  
it requires looking up,

it requires commitment to the process not because of who they are, but because of who you are  
in Jesus Christ.

Praying for the other person

55But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” 57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.