

Sermon for Sunday, May 18, 2014 Acts 7:55-60 "Witness"

In news stories about trials and in television courtroom dramas, often the turning point in the decision is based upon the testimony of a witness. Someone who was there. Someone who saw or heard what happened. Someone who was involved, perhaps. And more times than not, it is a difficult thing to get up on the stand and tell the story of what the person has seen.

You know how it goes on "Law and Order." Just by naming the perpetrator or by saying what they did, the witness puts himself at risk. Friends or family of the perpetrator may threaten the witness. If the accused gets off, they may go after the witness and silence them forever. It's a familiar plot device in such stories, this notion that serving as a witness carries a risk.

And so it goes in this morning's first reading, from Acts of the Apostles. It's the story of a witness and the consequences of testimony.

"But wait," you may ask. There's no courtroom. There is no judge, no jury. It's one guy. Stephen, and he's preaching and then the people to whom he is preaching stone him to death.

Stephen is identified as the first martyr of the Christian movement. He is a follower of Christ, a deacon of the early church. He was pressed into service as a deacon in Acts chapter 6, to be of service to poor widows. And he is doing precisely what Christ instructed all his followers to do: to tell the story of the Son of God.

So Stephen is bearing witness to his own understanding of Jesus Christ, preaching to a less-than-receptive crowd, the Greek speaking Jewish population. Some of their leaders accused him of blasphemy, and challenged him. So he responded with a very long sermon about how Jesus was the Messiah and how they were wrong. He called them 'stiff-necked,' which seems to be one of the worst things you could call a person in those days, and they got pretty hot about it. As they prepared to take action against him, he had a vision of God in heaven – the words we heard this morning – and announced this vision to those who were getting ready to stone him to death, the prescribed punishment for blasphemers. Among the crowd that day was the Pharisee Saul, the same Saul who later became the apostle Paul. Stephen gave his testimony and got the sort of result that all witnesses fear – he died for speaking the truth.

There's a long tradition of this sort of thing happening to Christians. Jesus Christ was killed for speaking the truth. Many of his disciples after Stephen died, for speaking the truth.

And so we call Stephen a martyr, someone who died because of his belief. But if we look at the word "martyr," we see that it actually comes from a Greek word that translates as "witness."

Now there's a scary proposition. Being a witness can lead to death. Testifying for our understanding of the truth of Jesus Christ our savior can lead to martyrdom.

It offers a whole range of questions that we might ask in response to the situation.

Does this mean that Jesus isn't going to help us if we try to tell his story?

Why would anyone want to become a voice for this church if it gets you killed?

Shouldn't the bad people get smited, like in the Old Testament?

Wouldn't it be better to just pray to ourselves and keep our mouths shut? Why take the risk?

They're all good questions. I expect that we have so internalized our protective mechanisms that we rarely notice that we never serve as witnesses to Christ in our lives. We rarely tell the story of how we have been changed by his saving grace. We rarely say that we have been saved, because we are afraid either consciously or unconsciously of losing our lives, or at the very least the respect of our friends or families or co-workers.

We may come to church on Sunday. We may wear a cross around our neck, or have a little fish symbol on our bumper, but those are such tepid signs of witness to the transforming power of Jesus Christ in our lives.

We don't want to take the risk. We don't want to face the fact that we are not able to step up and say what we believe. Why? Because someone might think we were ignorant or superstitious or silly because we believe?

It certainly isn't because our own lives are at risk.

But then I think of other witnesses. Martyrs. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who went back to Germany in the late 1930s when he could have stayed safe as a professor in a seminary in New York City, because he felt he had to bear witness to the horror that was the Holocaust, and who was executed by Hitler's regime. Like the Catholic activist Dorothy Day, who was vilified as a Communist because of her positions on pacifism and social justice, who now is considered a saint. Like Archbishop Oscar Romero, murdered while he was celebrating Holy Eucharist because he opposed the oppressive regime of his country and preached against it. Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated for continuing to fight for equal justice and opportunity for all. They witnessed for their faith and they paid the price.

Sounds like a great advertisement for the faith, doesn't it? Join us and we'll get you killed.

Why, then, would anyone follow Christ, knowing that Christ's charge to us is to be witnesses, and knowing that being a witness is something that carries risk. The hearer of our testimony may not want to hear it. They may act against us because of it.

And yet, there is that compulsion, that drive to speak the truth. Jesus died but lives. Jesus has saved us. Jesus helps us understand what real love looks like and walks with us in all we do.

Not a message that many people hear these days, when they need it most of all.

Why would we share it? Because we can't not say it.

We might not preach like Stephen. We might not have that vision of what heaven looks like – the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand – but we do have something. We have a sense of the final prize of eternal life.

So our witness might preaching – for some folks this is their gift – but for many of us, our witness is our life.

How do we live? Do we live in a way that is the embodiment of what Jesus Christ taught us, to love God and to love each other? Do we live in a way that shows the world that our values are not based on things like money or power or fame, but on service and simplicity and respect? Do we honor those whom society vilifies? Do we speak for those who have no voice? Do we imagine a world where the most beautiful thing is the peace of God, a meal and water for every child, safety and equal opportunity?

And then, most importantly, what do we do about it? Can we be witnesses who have slain our own fears so that the world can be rid of its brokenness? Can we allow our own egos to be martyred in service to a greater good? Can we imagine the place that Stephen saw, that Jesus spoke of in the Gospel, and can we help bring that to earth today and tomorrow and the next day?

Can we be speakers of truth and creators of a world that lives that truth, one word and one person at a time?

Amen.