

April 18, 2021 – (3rd Sunday of Easter – Stephen’s Witness)

Sermon Text – Acts 6:1—7:2a, 44-60

- Filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then 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. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then 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. -

Growing up in Wisconsin, I have to tell you that I didn't know a lot about Minnesota. My dad had a cousin who was married to a Lutheran pastor, who served a congregation somewhere in Minnesota, but it was far away and the land of the Vikings. I only saw them a few times at family reunions, and I really wasn't much interested. Now, I've lived here for more than 40 years and I have to say it suits me quite fine. It's been a great place to live and work; and, except for that one small imperfection I have about a certain professional football team, I'd say I'm pretty much a Minnesotan. All this came to me this week after reading an article by one of my colleagues reflecting on how her perceptions of place had changed over the years. She grew up in Maple Grove, right next to the city of Brooklyn Center, which has been much in the news this past week. She remembers it from her youth as the place that had the great community aquatic center where her church youth group went swimming because it had "the coolest pool around" with multiple waterslides, a huge swimming area and a big windows you could see from the nearby highway. What she couldn't see in those days was that things were rapidly changing around her. To the east, she says, "Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center were rapidly becoming majority-minority suburbs, and Maple Grove [on the west] was increasingly filled with shopping, restaurants...new schools — and upper-middle-class white people." The two sides of that combined school district were going in different directions, a fact which is now highlighted by the death of Daunte Wright and the week of subsequent civil unrest that has followed the killing of yet another black man at the hands of a white police officer. Just as the trial of Derek Chauvin is about to wrap up, we are reminded that nearly a year after George Floyd died with the pressure of Chauvin's knee on his neck, nothing much has changed. Skin color still matters. Privilege is still advantageous. Power can still find an excuse. And violence still seems like a solution. All of which

has made being a Minnesotan a bit less comfortable. As “the whole world watches,” as we are reminded by the national news media, it seems the least desirable side of Minnesota is on display. Which is not to say it would be any better had I stayed in Wisconsin. They’ve had their problems too.

Perhaps it has always been this way. Even a comedian like Steven Colbert could remark this week that not long after Adam and Eve were kicked out of Eden, one of their kids was ready to pick up a rock and bash the other one’s head in. It’s what people do. We may think it unfortunate and we might know there are better solutions, but we aren’t in control of everything that takes place and we can’t stop bad things from happening just by wishing them away. As we begin our brief journey through the Book of Acts, we hear about it in the early church. No sooner do the early Christians get themselves organized, than problems begin to appear. And differences in language and culture seem to be at the heart of it. Some of the widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. For whatever reason, they are being overlooked. They’re not getting their fair share. And so, they’re starving, while others are being well fed. Life in the early church was not perfect. There were problems and controversies from the very beginning. And it wasn’t always so simple and easy as we might think it was. First of all, in those early years, there were Jews of many types who had become followers of Jesus. There were the Jews from the country of Israel, who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, and Jews from other parts of the world, who primarily spoke Greek. The first group was probably the majority in Jerusalem. The second group the minority. The first group was probably more dominant. The second group less able to influence its surroundings. The first group was probably more content and more localized. The second group more sophisticated and more worldly. These are problems characteristic of any clash of people from different backgrounds, different languages, different skin colors, different nationalities. We know about such things in the church today and in the world around us. And the minority group’s widows, who were symbols of helplessness, poverty and need in the ancient world, were being left out, not receiving their fair share of daily food rations. Representatives of their group began to complain.

As a result, seven young men with Greek names are appointed as deacons to oversee the distribution of food. But they don’t confine themselves to table service. They begin to proclaim the gospel. They begin to heal the sick. They begin to work “great wonders and signs among the people.” Stephen is chief among these servants who are filled with “grace and power.” As a result, more controversy begins to arise. Others, who are apparently jealous of him, begin to argue with him. They bring

false accusations against him. And eventually, they have him brought before the religious council. They report that his words are threatening to bring change to the center of religious life, the temple. From Luke's storytelling perspective, this allows Stephen the opportunity to make his defense. He begins by repeating the entire history of God with God's people. Here are all the gracious things that God has done. Then, in the last episode, it is Jesus. Stephen is none too subtle. He proclaims that his accusers and the religious authorities are a "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, [who] are forever opposing the Holy Spirit,...and now [they] have become [Jesus'] betrayers and murderers." This enrages Stephen's listeners. They begin to "grind their teeth" against him, to remove their coats and to collect rocks, with which to stone him. Meanwhile, he is given a vision of heavenly glory. It provides him with the calm and the courage to face his death without malice against his attackers. He exhibits the pattern we have already seen in Jesus. He commends his spirit to the Lord and he prays for the forgiveness of those who are killing him.

To me, this is the central point of this story. It is all about forgiveness. And forgiveness is at the very heart of the good news to be carried forward "to the ends of the earth" by the Christian community. It is one of the most difficult things for us to learn as followers of Christ. How can we forgive, and how can we expect others to forgive, when we see our brothers and sisters suffering and being killed repeatedly, with very little reason or possible justification? Why does doing something foolish or misguided necessitate that a person should have the life squeezed out of them even after they are handcuffed and lying face down in the street? And what does it mean that a person has to die because he had an air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror and one of his arresting officers mistook her pistol for a taser? It makes no sense and it hurts my soul to think about it. This should not happen in the state that I live in. It's too nice of a place. But it does. Mob violence persists, even in our day and even among very small groups of people. Stephen probably wondered the same thing. How could he forgive those gathered against him, when they clearly enjoyed the privilege that comes to those who belong to the majority group? How could he pray for his enemies, when they are already gathering rocks and taking off their coats to stone him? How could he be full of faith and good courage, when his attackers insisted that they were right and he was wrong? It wouldn't be easy;...but it would be essential. Because Jesus would say that it is. Stephen would say that it is. And thousands of years of faithful witnesses would say that it is because we in the church know what it means to be forgiven so much. It's at the very center of God's dramatic story with God's people in Jesus Christ. It's there in the giving of God's Son in his death on the cross. It's there in the bread and the wine, Jesus' body and blood,

that we share with one another in his Holy Meal. It's there...where we need it the most, so that we might be filled with its "grace and power," so that we, like Stephen, might also be able to do "great wonders and signs among the people." It's there, so that when we feel disappointed or discouraged, we might know God's promise is still among us to fill us with God's strength and power to spread forgiveness and love to all the world.

Amen.