



7th Sunday of Easter – May 11-12-13, 2024

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Share Your Gift of Jesus

1. So others will enjoy it; 2. Even when others don't want it

Sermon Theme: Acts 6:8 – 7:2; 51-60

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." ¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" ² To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

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Dear Christian brothers and sisters in God's family,

So what gift did YOU get for your last birthday? Let me give you a few moments to think about it. Ready? Do you even remember? Maybe it was a favorite shirt, gift card, or toy. Whatever present you received, odds are great your gift is not still wrapped, stored, and forgotten in some closet. Whenever we get something new, we usually

want to take it out of the box and use it right away. And of course, we want to be the FIRST ones to use it. Care to test that theory? Just ask a three year old to share his birthday toy with a brother or sister. So much for peace on earth. Instead, you just might see in high definition the damage original sin does. But, let's not be too quick to point our fingers at the young ... older folks find it just as tough to share. Want an example? You just might not be fired-up to lend your brand new lawn mower to your neighbor -- you know, the one who doesn't say too much to you.

Now just imagine that you did offer to share your brand new gift with someone else . And that someone grabbed your shiny new gift, threw it to the ground, and stomped on it. How would you feel? Hurt, a little steamed or just righteously angry? Yet, that's what happened to Stephen, the first very first recorded Christian martyr. Our sermon reading from the book of Acts records the details. When Stephen shared His gift, the precious gift of faith in Christ, with his Jewish neighbors, they immediately rejected his Gospel invitation and stoned him to death. Now I know it doesn't seem like a real Mother's Day thing to do to focus on the stoning of Stephen. But, on this 7th weekend after Easter, we look at Stephen for a reason: we was a minor-league saint with major-league faith. As Lutherans, we obviously don't worship saints like Stephen nor do we pray to them – for that would be idolatry. But, we'd do well to praise God for them, for the faith they showed in times of great pressure And we'd do even better to imitate their God-given faith and pass that faith on to others. Yes, Stephen's life calls us to confess Christ, even when it hurts. So the writer Luke tells us today: **Share Our Gift of Jesus** with others. First, share this gift with others so they'll enjoy it. And second, share the gift of Jesus even when others really don't want it.

Several years ago, for my birthday, my wife Christine bought a new dishwasher because our previous one wasn't working anymore. It was supposed to be a present that everyone in the family could enjoy -- but our three kids probably would have been happier with a Wisconsin Dells weekend. What did you get your kids for their birthday? Maybe you got them a video game system so they could show you how slow your reflexes are. It's hard to find a gift the whole family can enjoy and use. But, the gift of Jesus, God's own Son, who entered our broken world as a baby at Bethlehem is one gift the Bible clearly teaches us that we all desperately need and all can use. With His perfect life in our place, His cross and glorious resurrection, Jesus is the one gift that keeps on giving. For Jesus gives us more than just entertainment or education. He gives hope to the hopeless, help to the helpless, and the answer to prayer to people who are lost without one. Quite literally, He brings salvation and heaven to earth.

Luke, the writer of our sermon text, tells us that Stephen was one gifted Christian man. Stephen had top-notch management skills. There's no doubt, he could've used his skill-set to run a successful business making a lot of money. But, the 12 apostles asked him to oversee the early Christian church's food pantry and Stephen jumped at the chance to serve. You might not know this. Stephen wasn't a called worker like a pastor, teacher, or staff minister. But, like the many talented men and women we have here at St. Paul's, Stephen was a dedicated lay-worker. He was also unselfish, humble,

and ready to serve the LORD. And while Stephen wasn't called by God to preach in a pulpit, he was more than prepared to give an answer for the hope he had.

But, the most special gift Stephen had, was the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. You might know that the name STEPHEN wasn't a Jewish name, but a Greek one. That tells us his family likely didn't raise him in a traditional Jewish-home. However, there was no doubt, Stephen knew His Old Testament as well or even better than any Jew. Stephen learned about the coming Messiah. And he also learned the hard truth that he, like all of us, didn't measure up to God's Ten Commandments. But, his questions and fears were put to rest when He learned of Christ. The life and death of Jesus was the golden key that opened the door of heaven to Stephen and every sinner who believes.

So Stephen treasured that saving key and didn't keep it in His pocket. Following the Great Commission to go and tell others, Stephen simply shared His gift. Our reading tells us how that went: ⁹ ***Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue ... who began to argue with Stephen.*** ¹⁰ ***But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.*** There's a pooper at every party and it's not always parties and parades when we share our Christian faith with others. The Greek-speaking Jews rejected the gift Stephen shared. And when they couldn't shut him down, his enemies intended to silence him permanently. ¹² ***So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.*** ¹³ ***They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.*** Talk about an evil plan: misleading half-truths, trumped-up charges, bold-faced lies. That was the plan of the Jews. How sad. How evil. Look at it this way: if your shoes were scuffed up and had holes in them, wouldn't you be happy to receive new shoes? And yet these Jews held on to their worn-out religion that would never give them peace instead of exchanging it for a new life in Christ. Stephen's audience turned everyone against him from the elite to the common man. And it was about to get much worse. In verse 15, we read: ¹⁵ ***All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*** As they turned up the heat, they watched Stephen, looking for any sign of doubt or weakness. But, all they saw was innocence, the God-given innocence of an angel. His calmness under fire only verified the great value of God's gift.

So what is the point of this sermon reading? It's this: God wants you and me to share Jesus as more than just a punchline, but bravely declare Him as the Savior of all, so all might come to the knowledge of the truth, believe, and share some heavenly real estate with us. God calls us to share Jesus with our own family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Some will listen. And some won't. Like Stephen, we should expect to face some kind of opposition like the co-worker who razzes you for your invitations to come to church or others who simply blow you off. Even when it appears they aren't interested, think again. They are watching us closely – seeing how we react. Will we give up so easily? It's easy to lose our cool when talking about a Viking-Packer rivalry or talking politics with a neighbor. But, if we raise our voices when we talk about Christ, what kind of witness of God's love are we giving? It just begs the question: are we

more concerned about that person's soul or just blowing our own horn? Dear friends, we know the gift of salvation is priceless. God wants us to handle it with care so others will enjoy it. My pastoral counsel is this when sharing your faith: Relax. Say a prayer, asking Jesus to give you the right words. He will. Be a witness. Just tell what you know. Just briefly talk about how Jesus came to save sinners like us by his cross and empty tomb. And give a simple invitation to go to church with you.

And then we have to realize that sometimes, no matter how careful are, some just won't accept our gift. That doesn't mean we've failed because God still wants us to **Share Our Gift** even when it seems like no one wants it. I doubt we'll ever have to face the kind of mission field Stephen did. Some of them, standing there that day were likely some of the same Jewish leaders who condemned Christ on Good Friday. But, notice how Stephen addressed them: **brothers and fathers**. He still showed these enemies of the cross respect. He also showed great respect for the Jewish culture. He spent the greater part of chapter 7 retelling Jewish history from Abraham to Moses. But, Stephen also didn't water down his witness. He also reminded them God's chosen people didn't always believe the Word or listen to the prophets. Stephen's point: don't value cultural tradition more than God's forgiveness in Christ.

His enemies – well, they refused to listen. Scripture tells us what happened next: ⁵⁴ **When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.** ⁵⁵ **But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.** ⁵⁶ **“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”** ⁵⁷ **At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,** ⁵⁸ **dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.** The Jews realized who Stephen was talking about. When they hear his final words, it's like piranha to blood. But, Stephen wasn't trying to aggravate them. He actually was giving them one last chance. But, they stoned him. Their blind rage wouldn't let them show restraint or mercy. And yet, the Holy Spirit gave Stephen the strength to forgive his enemies. His final words echoed our Savior's: **Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**

At first glance, Stephen's death seemed like a senseless act of violence. Yet, read the rest of the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit would use this martyr to inspire countless others to be faithful until death and bravely shared their faith even when some didn't want it.

For many in our day, the salvation Jesus brings is a white elephant gift – unwanted and a joke. But, nothing could be further from the truth. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Nothing is more important than sharing these saving truths with a world that is dying to hear them. Join us here at St. Paul's as we share Jesus with one more person this week. Let's stand like Stephen, despite great pressure to fall. Let's simply share our gift. Amen.