

STEPHEN, A MAN FULL OF FAITH  
Acts 6, 7.53-8.1-3

Isn't it a very special and sacred moment  
on this All Saints Sunday when we read those names?  
The names of family and friends who have gone on before us?

It is always touching hear those names and think of their lives.  
I'm always feel awe and amazed as I learn about their lives.

They are our grandmothers and grandfathers,  
fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, a favorite uncle or aunt,  
that kindred spirit, good friend, or even just a friend of the family.

They had their likes and dislikes,  
They had their faith and their failures,  
They had their struggles and successes,  
some of those things we know about, some we don't,

But we do know these folks were God given and God sent.  
They helped and held us through the difficult times,  
and their presence made the good times even better.

The thought of them is life-giving.  
There might be a tears in our eyes but there are smiles on our lips.

And to know they have joined that great cloud of witnesses  
that the writer of Hebrews talks about, that is encouraging to us, isn't it?

Well, today I want to talk about another  
who is part of that great cloud of witnesses.

This man's faith-filled life can be an inspiration  
and an encouragement to us as people of faith as we struggle day to day with life.

His name is Stephen.

**STEPHEN WAS SELECTED TO SERVE BECAUSE OF HIS FAITH.**

It was estimated that in a few months the early church had grown to between 20-25,000.  
When you think about it that is about the size of Aberdeen.

The church was experiencing some growing pains  
and some people were falling through the cracks.

It can happen in churches.  
People fall through the cracks  
despite a great desire and a great effort not to let that happen.

Here are the specific circumstances;

***<sup>1</sup>In those days when the number of disciples was increasing,  
the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews  
because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."***

There evidently weren't enough volunteers to take care of the new converts, who for the most part happened to be the Greek speaking widows.

The solution;

***<sup>2</sup>So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.***

***<sup>3</sup>Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.***

***We will turn this responsibility over to them***

***<sup>4</sup>and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."***

Now don't make this mistake.

This is not saying that one ministry is more important than another, or any one person is more important than the other.

All of those chosen needed to be faith filled and full of the Spirit.

God has gifted each of us, gifted even you and I at FUMC, and given each of us has the responsibility to share out of what we have been given.

***"God's various gifts are handed out everywhere;***

***But they all originate in God's Spirit.***

***God's various ministries are carried out everywhere,***

***But they all originate in God's Spirit.***

***God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere;***

***But God himself is behind it all.***

***Each person is given something to do to show who God is.***

***Everyone gets in on it. Everyone benefits."*** I Corinthians 12.4-6 (MSG)

The responsibility Pastor Eldon has is obviously different from the responsibility you and I have.

Someone has to do what he does.

His ministry frees you and I,

it gives us time to do the ministry we are called to do.

The ministry I have frees Pastor Eldon and you to do the ministry God wants you to do.

We have a wonderful staff.

Their ministry is different but no less important than ours as pastors and different but no more important than yours.

Their ministry frees and support the rest of us to do our God-given ministry.

The people that support the staff, that clean the church, that count the money, that lead committees or teach groups, that greet or usher in worship, that do any other of a great number of different tasks are all important.

Now do hear this-that when there is conflict in the church it can be resolved.

The Bible made it sound so simple didn't it?

The disciples called a meeting, listened to the complaint,

explained their position, and expanded the programming of the church.

They directed the dissatisfied people were asked to appoint the people of their choice to take care of the problem.

Surprise, surprise!!! It worked!!!

Verse 5, ***"This proposal pleased the whole group."***

And one of the people chosen happened to be Stephen,  
***"They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit..."***  
**and "full of God's grace and power" (verse 8)**

Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit...  
and so full of faith in Jesus Christ that he was willing to die for him, and he did.

So full of God's power, so filled to the brim with God's energy  
that he could perform miracles and healings, and he did.

So full of God's wisdom that he could defend the faith, and he did.

Stephen is a great choice, God's choice.  
He was good, godly, gifted, and he had the glow,  
and the Bible tells us the church continued to grow, verse 7,  
***"So the word of God spread.***  
***The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly,***  
***and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."***

STEPHEN WAS SELECTED BECAUSE OF HIS FAITH and  
**STEPHEN WAS SEIZED BECAUSE OF HIS FAITH.**  
Because of the growth, the signs and wonders being performed  
and the healing done in the name of Jesus ***"opposition arose."***

On the first front, antagonist attack the faith itself.  
The result, verse 10  
***"but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit  
by whom he (Stephen) spoke."***

But if you can't win the argument, if you can't destroy the faith,  
Plan B is to discredit the person expressing their faith.

If you discredit that person,  
that in turn destroys their credibility and your argument against the faith is won.  
We see that all the time don't we?

So, they initiate plan B.  
Verses 11-14 tell us that they seized Stephen and took him to court.

He appears before the Sanhedrin,  
the same court that Jesus appeared in a few months before  
and the same court room Peter and John had just appeared in to defend the faith.

The antagonist found false witnesses and brought trumpeted up charges against Stephen.  
Same court, different players. Same song, different verse.  
Same book, different chapter.  
Oh, there is one new wrinkle, one new line, one new look.

***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."***

Wow!!! You know, I was wondering...if when Pastor Eldon, Pastor Dave, Marwin, Marshall. or myself are preaching, do you see that glow and think of us as angelic?

Anyway they couldn't take their eyes off of Stephen, his face was like the face of an angel.

STEPHEN WAS SELECTED BECAUSE HIS FAITH, SEIZED BECAUSE HIS FAITH, AND **STEPHEN SPOKE OUT ON BEHALF OF HIS FAITH.**

Stephen preached to the preachers.

Pastor Eldon next week will talk about the content of that sermon.

All I'm going to say is that when preaching that sermon

Stephen exhibits great conviction and courage.

He had to know what he was saying would be sealing his own death sentence.

He calls a spade a spade, he calls these people, stiff-necked people, bullheaded.

He tells them they have calluses on their hearts and flaps on their ears.

As people of faith God forbid that we become as ugly as these religious people.

We must not believe, behave, or boast like they did.

We must simply recognize, receive, and share the truth of the gospel.

In his sermon, Stephen went on to remind them that their ancestors killed God's prophets, that they themselves killed Jesus, and that they were given the law, but didn't keep it.

And after the sermon they said,

"oh, thank you Stephen, that was a wonderful sermon, great job-NOT!!!

Verses 54-55 tells us,

***"When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him."***

They basically went nuts, they came unglued, and they became a rioting mob.

They had lost control and they were afraid.

Stephen's hardly noticed, he looked up. He looked up to heaven.

How profound is that-he looked up to heaven.

That reminds us, in the midst of conflict, confusion, and chaos to look up, to look to God.

Sometimes we look down in hopelessness, look around for hope,

or look in thinking we'll find that hope we need.

But the place to look, UP! Look to God and be patient.

He saw heaven, and he said,

***"I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."***

It's like a general at the airport standing there, ready to welcome the soldiers home.

Well that only ticked off these jealous pillars of the community, these fearful defenders of the faith and these mean models of morality even more so **STEPHEN WAS STONED BECAUSE OF HIS FAITH.**

Verse 57, **"At this they covered their ears, and yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him** (it was a stampede), **dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.**

The message said they pelted him with stones."

Don't just toss this stoning thing aside too quickly. Stoning was a long, drawn out, painful, vicious, and violent death.

Then we see and hear that Stephen prayed like Jesus, forgave like Jesus, and died like Jesus.

Verse 59 , **"While they were stoning him,** (as the rocks rained down on him) **Stephen prayed, 'Lord, receive my Spirit.'** **Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold** (don't blame) **this sin against them.'** **When he said this he died.**

Stephen not only prayed like Jesus, forgave like Jesus, And died like Jesus, but in his death he sowed seeds like Jesus.

Catch this, verse 58, **"Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their cloths at the feet of a young man named Saul."** The seed is sown. You'll hear more about Saul later.

Right then, Verse 8.1 tells us that, **"And Saul was there, giving approval to his death."** This guy Saul, the Osama Ben Laden of their day, was there and actually congratulating the killers.

Do you remember the glee in Ben Laden's voice on that tape after the Twin Towers went down. He was so delighted that more people were killed than he thought.

I imagine Saul in the same frame of mind, he goes wild, 8.1 **"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."**

Verse 8.3 **"But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house,** That sounds like Gestapo like tactics, doesn't it? It is. **he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."**

BUT, God doesn't waste the pain. Acts 8.4 in the Message says,

**"Forced to leave their home base, Christians all became missionaries. Where ever they were scattered they preached the message of Jesus."**

It's hard to find those faith filled role models in our culture today, isn't it. We most often gravitate towards liking the actions and attitudes of athletes or actors, who often aren't the best nor the brightest role models.

I trust you came today to be encouraged as a faith-filled person. And I pray that you can look at Stephen's life, take something from his life, and be encouraged.

