

A Reflection For Today

HopeForNiagara.org



By: Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow

Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow is a retired pastor and serves on the American Baptist Churches of New York State Board of Missions.

Some Thoughts on the Story of St. Stephen

(Texts: Acts 7:59-8:8 & Wisdom of Solomon 4:7-15)

I wonder how much of a consolation it is when a person dies for people to say to the surviving family: "He/she's in a better place... God must have wanted to call him or her home... Her/his mission on earth must have ended and so God took her/him home... (or worst of all, if someone has had a similar experience) I know how you feel..." I wonder if Stephen's family heard any of these platitudes as they mourned the loss of their brother and son.



Speaking from a personal perspective I don't think any of these things help. Even if you have lost a loved one suddenly, tragically, or violently, NO ONE knows exactly how you feel. And the fact that they are safe and warm in the arms of Jesus does little to comfort you at the moment because - frankly - you want them safe and warm in YOUR OWN arms.

Stephen was a powerful witness in the early days after Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. Indeed, Stephen's testimony before the Council of the Sanhedrin is one of the most complete confessions of faith in the whole New Testament; and yet he is stoned to death for his unwavering witness.

The question is: How do we decide when to walk away as a peacekeeper, and when to stand firm and face persecution and martyrdom? I believe the answer is different for each and every person on the planet. But this story and its placement here in the Acts of the Apostles contrasts Stephen's faithfulness with who Saul was *before* his conversion and became Paul the Apostle. Saul was a devout Pharisee who ravaged and persecuted believers in Christ.

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The question is: How do we decide when to walk away as a peacekeeper, and when to stand firm and face persecution and martyrdom? I believe the answer is different for each and every person on the planet. But this story and its placement here in the Acts of the Apostles contrasts Stephen's faithfulness with who Saul was *before* his conversion and became Paul the Apostle. Saul was a devout Pharisee who ravaged and persecuted believers in Christ.

But here's something to ponder, after Stephen is stoned the believers scatter into the neighboring regions. God uses the present moment to spread the Gospel "into the world." I don't believe we can say that it was God's *will* that Stephen be stoned, just as I don't think it was God's *will* that Jesus suffer on the cross. But God knows we humans can be selfish and hateful towards one another. Struggle and suffering is something we experience and far to often create. God knows the minds and hearts of humankind. Innocent people get caught in the crossfire of life, and that's hard to take. Even so, I make no excuses for God, and God doesn't expect us to. I do not know *why* God allows things to happen as they do. I only know that God can take whatever horrible circumstances we perform as fallen human beings and *create* hope and new life.

I have heard it said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The believers in this story of Stephen were scattered like a sower sows seeds. Our text says, *now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word.* And so, Stephen's stoning was not the end of the gospel witness, it was the commencing of the Great Commission of Christ carried into the world: "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47)

Surprisingly, a lasting part of that witness is Saul's *own* encounter with the resurrected Christ, all the churches he started as the Apostle Paul, all the letters he wrote, and his own persecution as a result of his conversion as a believer in Christ Jesus.

Who could have predicted that Saul, who persecuted the church of Christ so hatefully, could become the Apostle Paul, THE apostle who has played such a major role in what The Church of Christ is today?! Only through God's great love for *all the nations* could this be possible.

And now as we live into the birth of the Christ Child Jesus, and follow his early years as a refugee among the peoples, let us share the Gospel of the kingdom of God with us, Immanuel. And for those who mourn a significant loss at this time of year, may you remember that nothing is impossible with God. The doors of eternity are opened in Christ Jesus our Lord, to the glory of God the Father, now and forever. Amen

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