



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 5 (A)

All We Need

[RCL] Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

In the season of Easter, a reading from the Acts of the Apostles is often substituted for the lesson from the Hebrew Bible. This is appropriate since Acts follows the work of the early Christian community in the years immediately following the Resurrection. Today's passage is the story of the martyrdom of Stephen. Some background to bring us to this place is needed and helpful. Peter and the other apostles have been imprisoned and beaten by the temple authorities for preaching their message that Jesus is the Messiah; nevertheless, thousands are being converted through the power of the Holy Spirit. These first Christians have sold all their possessions and hold all in common with the community of believers.

Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, has been chosen to help distribute food to the faithful. Jealous factions among the Jews in Jerusalem accuse him of blasphemy and instigate false witnesses against him. His rebuttal, a sermon about Israel's history of persecuting prophets, infuriates the high priests and they drag him outside the city to be stoned to death. Thus, Stephen becomes the church's first martyr. This is a turning point in the Book of Acts, setting the scene for more intense and violent persecution of the Christians. The passage is remarkable for its contrast between the brutal violence of the mob and the calm faith of Stephen who prays for them as he dies.

Stephen bears witness to Christ with his dying breath, a message of faith and grace. Yet it is impossible to overlook the violence perpetrated by religious people in this passage. It is all too easy for those comfortably in power to respond to a challenge with violence, and not only in the first century of the common era. There are many examples in recent news stories, young black men or gay and transgender people shot or beaten to death, mass shootings in schools and synagogues. Certainly, the Easter story of redemption has not ended the cycle of violence. Yet we as Christians continue to trust in the message of the Holy Spirit – to witness to the gospel message of hope and to commend our spirits to God in the hour of death.

Yet even as we live in hope, we cannot ignore the paradox that exists in scripture. The Gospel of John is another study in contrast. The contrast between the beauty of John's poetic passages and the violence sometimes instigated by John's message is painful. The reading of the Passion according to John, which identifies Jesus' murderers as "the Jews," has been used to justify anti-Semitic comments, threats, and violence for over a thousand years. We can try to explain the historical context of John's community, to point out that when John says "the Jews," he means not all Jews but the Pharisees. Still, we continue to read the passage on Good Friday, and we hear what we hear. This is confusing at best, dangerous and violent at worst.

Today's gospel passage from John contains similar contrast, paradox, and confusion. The setting is Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. He has washed their feet, Judas the betrayer has slipped away into the night, Jesus has told his followers that his departure is imminent, that they cannot follow him where he is going, and that Peter will deny him three times. In the midst of the beauty of Jesus' assurances – "Do not let your hearts be troubled," "I will come again" – we have human betrayal, doubt, confusion, and despair.

Jesus' words are meant to inspire hope and trust: "My Father's house has many dwelling places." These encouraging words can be read as inclusive, as assurance that God has space for different kinds of people and different kinds of faith. A message of reconciliation. Yet only a few short verses later, in a stark illustration of the dilemma of John's gospel, Jesus states that no one comes to the Father except through him.

Here is some of John's most beautiful poetry, revealing Jesus as the source of life, abundance, and grace, indeed revealing Jesus as the incarnation of God. "I am the way and the truth and the life... If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Words that encapsulate John's message to his community: Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Words that reiterate Jesus' message to his followers: You have known me; you have known God; we are one and the same. Words that inspire trust and confident faith.

But what about the statement, "No one comes to the Father except through me." We can explain what Jesus really meant: you have everything you need to find the way to the Father, I am enough, trust in me. Nevertheless, Jesus' words can be, and often are, read as exclusive. Jesus is the sole means of salvation. Jesus is the only way.

Jesus continues teaching and reassuring his disciples that even though he is leaving them soon, they can be certain of his presence and his grace: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me." The unity of God is deeply and mystically inspiring.

Yet again, there is a difficulty. Jesus promises, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." Here is another statement that leads to confusion and disappointment, since all too often our prayers are not answered. We can explain, usually blaming the asker, citing impatience or failure to recognize the real

answer to the prayer. But the space for confusion, frustration, and anger when our requests seem to go unheard is real.

Reading the Bible, like reading history, may sometimes upset and disturb; it may make us angry. Amid violence, hatred, jealousy, division, and exclusion, we continue to seek the Way to hope and grace. Even in the face of life's cruelty, we reach for love and grace. Jesus is all we need.

Let us close with a prayer from the Taizé community: Living God, at times we are strangers on the earth, disconcerted by the violence, the harsh oppositions. And you breath upon us the Spirit of peace like a gentle breeze. Transfigure the deserts of our doubts and so prepare us to be bearers of reconciliation wherever you place us, until a hope of peace arises in our world. Amen.

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