

9/27/20

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Priewe

Text: Acts 8:1b-8

Theme: They Preached the Word Wherever They Went

Tragedy had struck and the devil was squealing with joy! One of the believers own number had just been killed, more than that, brutally murdered by an angry mob. And the reason? For proclaiming Christ! The rest of the believers who saw this grisly scene would remember forever the words of their friend's dying breath. As the boulders bruised and battered this man's body, the last words on his lips echoed his Savior's plea from the cross "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them**" (Acts 7:60).

So this man became the first of the New Testament Church to proclaim the risen Christ and be martyred for it. And his fearless preaching was a testament to the growing M.O. (the modus operandi, the operating method) among these believers--**preaching the word wherever they went!** See the apostles had been persecuted before, even flogged and put in prison, and yet "**day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah**" (Acts 5:42). This brought things to a whole new level because this man preached the word wherever he went, even if it meant to his death.

Who was this victim, the first to be martyred after Jesus' resurrection? He was a Greek man named Stephen, who is only known to us from about two chapters of the Bible. Stephen wasn't one of the Twelve disciples whom Jesus had chosen and trained during three years of "missionary" school. In our terms, we might call Stephen a layman or a lay leader, but let that title never be thought of as something lesser. Like if someone might say, "Well I'm *just* a layperson." No, the Bible doesn't speak of "*just laypeople*." The book of Acts speaks highly of Stephen, telling us he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Because of his good reputation and abilities, he was specifically chosen and called as one the Seven who would see to the distribution of food and other practical needs of the people who were being overlooked.

We might think of Stephen's role as similar to one of our councilmen who have been asked by the congregation to carry out one of the specific roles of our ministry. But he certainly was under no illusion that Jesus' great commission to make disciples somehow didn't apply to him. So he took Jesus' command personally and preached fearlessly and performed great wonders according to the power that God had given him. And Jesus' warnings came true. "**You will be hated because of my name.**" (Matthew 10:22). "**In fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God** (John 16:2). Those words rang true as they stoned Stephen to death for what they said was blasphemy.

And the devil squealed with joy at his victory, rejoicing that he had taken out a "castle" in this epic chess game of life or death, with more soon to follow. It certainly appeared that way as that frightful day witnessed not only the tragic death of a dear believer, but also the outbreak of a great persecution against the whole church. The believers scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, running for their lives. The church's greatest persecutor stepped onto the battlefield to hunt them down. Before, Saul had watched from the sideline giving his approval as they murdered Stephen. But now, "**Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.**" (Acts 8:3)

It looked like the beginning of the end for the fledgling church. The worst single act of persecution they had seen so far in the stoning of Stephen was followed up by a wild dog of man hunting them down to "eliminate" them, as the Greek word says.

Now at a time like this, what might seem sensible for the believers to do? Get out of town and at least lay low for a while! Stay quiet until things blow over! Certainly nobody wants to wind up dead like Stephen. Maybe if they wait long enough, that persecuting dog Saul will lose their scent.

Terrible situations like the traumatic one they were in are filled with all kinds of extremely **reasonable temptations**. Temptations that don't seem like temptations. Tricks that lull you to sleep right before consuming you. The most tempting of all these temptations would have been to scatter, get

disconnected, forget their priorities, and let their witness about Christ die! After all they could die for opening their mouths too widely! Stephen certainly proved that!

Maybe this would be a good time to just regroup and worry about themselves, to keep up with some maintenance, to accomplish the bare minimum they needed to survive and let the message rest for a while. Such reasonable temptations! And how the devil squeals with joy at every chance he gets to silence the church's voice in fear or desperation or busyness or just plain monotony.

We too are facing some of the same reasonable temptations in the midst of an anxious and frustrating situation. We're not facing a violent persecutor dragging us out of our house, but we are dealing with every ploy in the devil's playbook to capitalize on the distance that the virus is putting between us. All the distance provides us with the "oh so" reasonable temptation to get disconnected from everyone around us and to completely forget about the mission we have to reach others!

The devil smiles because he's got all kinds of new reasonable ways to silence our witness. "There is nothing we can do right now anyway. People don't want us out there talking to them. We've got plenty of things to take care of around here, we don't need to worry about out there so much." The devil loves to capitalize on "me-first-itis," which is a deadly disease!

Another reality is, it is just flat out harder to talk to people than ever before. With masks and six feet of distance and the nagging curiosity about whether the person you're interacting with might be transmitting the virus to you or you to them, it's hard! As if we weren't already tentative enough about injecting the words of everlasting life into a normal conversation, now we have one more incessant excuse to wave at the opportunity as it passes by.

It's a reasonable temptation after a bad situation to just hunker down in the bunker and not poke our heads out of the hatch until it's all over. But here's the truth that makes that so dangerous. The devil's war on our witness will never be over. There will never be a perfectly good or safe time. Now, I'm not saying, "throw all our precautions to the wind," or "start ignoring health regulations and guidelines." But the church must always find a way to continue storming the gates of hell until Jesus returns.

So what did those early believers do after the death of Stephen? They did what the gospel had called them to do! Sure they scattered, a wise thing to do given the situation. But the devil wasn't planning for what they did next. **"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4).** They had a Savior who had gone to his death for them, and they were willing to go to theirs for the mission he gave them. Jesus had commissioned his church from the Mount of Olives to be his **"witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth," (Acts 1:8)** and this was the unconventional way he used to get his witnesses to those places. The devil took his best shot at stamping out the fire and instead he sent gospel bearing sparks sprawling in every direction. The fire took off! We've recently been reminded of just how unstoppable a wildfire can be, and this gospel wildfire has been spreading and burning ever since that time!

One of those gospel bearing sparks was Philip, another one of the 7 chosen administrators, who went down to a city in Samaria. Remember all the roadblocks that might have stopped Philip from going to Samaria. There was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans and a lot of the hatred was just based plain racism between each other. But, **"Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said."** (Acts 8:6)

Where he went, he preached! Here is maybe the coolest part of this whole string of events that started with a brutal death, raging persecution, and a mass dispersal. Look at how it ends. People listened closely to the message and **"so there was great joy in the city"** (Acts 8:8). The believers stuck to their M.O. **They preached the word wherever they went.** That's what the message of forgiveness does! It brings joy!

Sometimes we take the warnings from Jesus meant for rainy days about how the world will hate us and our message and let those words drown out the reality that many people will rejoice to hear the Good News we bring—Good News of great joy that will be for all the people! A Savior! He is Christ the Lord. The message of Jesus brings joy and this joy is not for us alone but for all who would receive the message.

So let's not forget that our preaching might well bring persecution, but it also might bring great joy! That's a reason we can't afford to let the fears and anxieties about the world we live in stop us from sharing the joy of Jesus.

The believers in this story brought the gospel to Judea and Samaria, right according to plan—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria... But there is still part of Jesus' marching orders that remains for us. **"To the ends of the earth!"** That's our part! Whether it's the other side of Florida Ave. and Doris Lane in Appleton or whether it's supporting missions in Vietnam. Each and every one of us is called to be concerned for the people who have never set foot inside our walls here at Mount Olive. It's a helpful reminder for us that Jesus gave the believers their M.O. on the Mount of Olives! That was there launching point and from there they **shared the word wherever they went!**

Let's make that our Mount Olive M.O: **preaching the word wherever we go.** Our M.O.M.O. Something we remind ourselves of every time we look at this building we call Mount Olive. This is the place where we gather and our feed, but this is also the place from which we scatter in order to **preach the word wherever we go.**

For you, it might not look like Philip going to Samaria to preach or me preaching a sermon out on the front lawn. But there's those little opportunities when your friend is talking about her grief, about her pain, or his regrets. Those are little places for you to share Jesus and the joy he brings. And it will mean something when it comes not just from the Livestream preacher, but from you their friend. People sharing Jesus with other people. It's a simple M.O., but it's the only way this family will continue to grow! Lord, make us bold to preach your word wherever we go! Amen!