

Acts 7:54-8:1

Stones

20 April 2008

1 Peter 2:2-10

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

Easter 5

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Now that the Supreme Court has ruled on lethal injection as a method of execution, the death penalty is back on the table. And here in Alabama we seem to have an Attorney General whose public statements hint that he doesn't simply support capital punishment, he is eager to get to it. While I don't agree with him, I don't question his sincerity or his right as a public official to hold that position. I do question his eagerness.

When I began studying the text for today – the stoning of Stephen – I did not at first think of it in relation to Alabama's death penalty. But all week long I kept being drawn back to the question. And I suppose any honest approach to the issue ought to start with confession. And that is, I am aware of the darker corners of my own soul that are in some way drawn to the allure of violence, and if someone had killed a loved one of mine I would crave vengeance as much as anyone.

So on an objective level, I have no great sympathy with murderers on death row. On the other hand, how many stories have now appeared where 20 years later, 30 years or more, it turns out an innocent person has been convicted? Even among those on death row. Seven in Alabama, in fact. So how many innocent people have been executed in this country? We don't know. I don't know that any serious effort has been made to find out. No one wants to know. But it is hard not to ask the question: how many innocent lives is it worth, to keep the death penalty? Some would say "none." Others say, "Who knows; no system is perfect."

No one seriously claims our system is without flaw. It cannot be administered impartially. One hundred ninety-one people on death row right now – the largest per capita death row population in the country. A few more white than black. However, about 80% of death row inmates have been convicted for crimes involving white victims; yet 65% of all homicide victims in Alabama are black. It's hard to know exactly what that means; it may mean only that poor people have a harder time getting justice in our courts system.

In our Acts passage today we have the tale of an execution – Stephen, a deacon of the church, the first Christian martyr after the death of Jesus. (Roman historian Josephus records that Jesus' brother James was stoned to death after a trial the high priest instigated. The judgment was later overturned and the high priest lost his office, but James was still dead.) From the text, we don't really know if the stoning of Stephen was a legal execution or a lynching. In the chapter preceding our passage for today, he was dragged before the high council and charged with blasphemy for what he'd been teaching about Jesus, that Jesus would change the Law of Moses. When they asked him about this, he recited the history of the Jewish people, including Moses and the prophets, telling

salvation history, and ending with the counter-charge that they had executed the Righteous One whom God sent them – Jesus. He even got a little lippy with them (vs. 52): “Which of the prophets did your ancestors *not* persecute?”

It was not simply that quip, but rather his unyielding, transparent faith that enraged the crowd, provoking them to violence and proving he was right. We almost always kill the prophets. God sometimes says things we don’t want to hear. We get to hear this passage today just a little while after the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis – another prophet who often spoke truth in such a way that it stirred up rage in reaction, and rejection from even the Christian community.

They dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death, in front of a young government official named Saul. That same Saul, not very long after, would throw face down and blind on the Damascus Road, come to faith in Christ, be re-named Paul, and write most of the Epistles in our Bible! And you wonder, was it just the Damascus Road experience that did that? Or did numerous things come together, including watching Stephen and too many other Christian martyrs die? We owe Paul for a big piece of the Bible. Maybe we owe Stephen too.

I said a minute ago on an objective level I didn’t have a lot of sympathy for those on death row. On a subjective level, though, I can’t say that. There’s more darkness in all of us than we want to admit. And how small a change of circumstance would it take – of birth or raising or crazy-making experiences – would it take that it would be me (or you) sitting on death row alongside those who are there. I don’t know.

Then here is Stephen – very possibly, under those laws, guilty as charged and, by those laws, rightly sentenced to death. That’s not to mention that Jesus Himself, our reason for being here today, was executed, by those laws. That gives me pause. The death of the first martyr, Stephen, mirrors the death of Jesus. While he is being killed, Stephen prays for Jesus to receive his spirit, then prays that God will forgive those who kill him. Just as Jesus did.

So we can’t say that Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness for enemies does not apply to us, even in times of fear and crisis. Luke (who wrote Acts) doesn’t give us that out. Stephen lived out that impossible ethic of loving the enemy. You don’t have to be the Son of God to act as Jesus did. Jesus tells us: “Truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” (John 14:12)

T.S. Eliot dramatized the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury in 1170. In the final scenes of the tale, Becket is pulled inside the Cathedral by three priests trying to save him from the king’s troops. They bar the door. And Becket, with Stephen-like boldness, cries:

Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors!
I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ,
The sanctuary, turned into a fortress.
The church shall be open, even to our enemies.
We are not here to triumph by fighting, by stratagem, or resistance.
Not to fight with beasts as men. We have fought the beast
And have conquered. We have only to conquer
Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory.
Now is the triumph of the Cross, now
Open the door! I command it. Open the door!ⁱ

General Norman Schwartzkopf is reputed to have said: “It is God’s job to forgive; it is our job to arrange the meeting.” I don’t think so. I can’t get away from the image of the Amish community near Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania, who when in October of ’06 five of their children were killed in a schoolhouse shooting and five wounded, showed up at the home of the shooter to pray with his family and forgive. It boggles the mind, and it re-enacts the Christianity of Stephen, and it re-enacts the Passion of Christ.

“(Stephen) was able to tell the new story which the Risen victim (Jesus Christ) had made possible. And live out this story in an absolutely coherent way, as if death did not exist, and do it to the end.”ⁱⁱ Jesus’ death did not mean that no one else would ever be unjustly killed. Stephen was just the first of martyrs that would follow. There have been myriads of victims of human violence and rage, both innocent and guilty. (And my Calvinism would ask – who is truly innocent?) And when it happens, every time it happens, we re-enact the Passion of Christ.

In that we discover our own violence – we, the ones with the stones. In that we discover our own identity as the victim – we, the ones being stoned. In that we discover the possibility of renewal that repentance brings, that forgiveness brings.

The resurrection cannot be denied. Gil Baillie wrote about the Stephen passage: “*The moral of this story is that every time we try to expel the Gospel, which the Sanhedrin is trying to do again here, we re-enact the event that revealed it. We re-enact the Paschal story and therefore reinforce the revelation. That’s why the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. There’s no getting rid of it.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Peter, in his first Epistle, uses stones not as weapons but as metaphor, and calls us to be living stones, not deadly ones. Jesus, he wrote, is the cornerstone laid in Zion, a stone that was rejected by the existing political and religious authorities, a stone that would make them stumble. And he is now the cornerstone of a spiritual house being built. Peter calls to his readers (to us) to come be the rest of the stones in the house, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood.” (1Peter 2:5) That is, our life itself is to be lived holy, a sacrifice to God.

The Christian mystic Julian of Norwich wrote *“God lays upon everyone he longs to bring into his bliss something that is no blame in his sight but for which they have been blamed and despised in the world. Scorned, mocked, and cast out. He does this to offset the harm they should otherwise have from the pomp and vainglory of this earthly life, and to make their road to him easier, and to bring them higher in his joy without end.”*

What does it come down to? Maybe not how bad or possibly how good are the condemned. But what kind of people do *we* want to be? Do I want to be more like those eager for vengeance, feeling satisfaction at the death of another, any other? Or more like the Amish of Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania? Peter reminds us, in our Epistle lesson today, of why we were chosen – “in order that we proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Eliot, T.S. Murder in the Cathedral

ⁱⁱ Allison, James. Raising Abel, Crossroad Press, NY, 1996. p. 79-80

ⁱⁱⁱ Baillie, Gil. At Cross Purposes, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 2001