

Sticks and Stones

Sermon text: Acts 7:54-8:1

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I. Just another saying?

True story: a student was just starting off in middle school. He's no longer the big fish fifth-grader in the small pond of elementary school. Now he's one of the middle school newbies who are trying desperately to avoid being noticed by the big, bad eighth-graders. Except this poor kid is tall and skinny, so he tends to be more noticeable than some of his shorter classmates. To make matters worse, his ears are a bit on the large side. To make matters even worse than that, his big ears stick out so they are even more noticeable yet.

With all those noticeable characteristics, how long do you think it took the eighth-graders to start giving that sixth-grader a hard time? That's right – not very long. The taunts were not particularly creative: “Hey, Dumbo, if you flapped those ears could you fly?” “Hey, kid, why don't you close those car doors sticking out from the side of your head!”

How would you guess that kid felt about the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me?” That's right – he couldn't stand that saying because he really disliked being call “Dumbo” and all the other taunts from the eighth-graders. In fact, it bothered him enough that, as soon as he could, the kid had surgery on his ears so they wouldn't stick out any more. Being singled out; being picked on; being the object of negative attention from others can be one of life's difficult experiences.

That's part of what Stephen experienced in the passage we just read from the book of Acts. Of course, he experienced much more than just being taunted, so let's look at the events that led up to the stoning of Stephen. If you look back in your Bible to the beginning of Acts, chapter 6, that is where we are first introduced to this amazing first century Christian leader. When the early church selected the first deacons to support the work of the apostles, Stephen was among them. Here's how it's described in Acts 6, beginning in verse 3:

“Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch.

Stephen is the only one among these original seven deacons who is singled out as a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” I think that's why Stephen Ministry was named after him.

Just a few verses later, in Acts 6:8, we read: “Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.” In other words, he was among the leaders of the early church who was doing miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit. It was an amazing time – new followers of Jesus as Messiah were being added to the church constantly. But the popularity of the movement was attracting negative attention from Jewish religious leaders. So they disputed what Stephen was saying about Jesus. However, Acts 6, verse 10 tells us, “But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he (Stephen) spoke.” So instead they accused him of blasphemy – speaking against Moses and God, and had Stephen hauled before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, to defend himself against their false accusations.

II. All's well that ends well?

In Acts 7, when the Jewish high priest asked Stephen to present his defense to the charges, the deacon replied by offering an interpretation of the salvation history of the Jewish people. Beginning with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin how the other sons of Jacob rejected their brother Joseph and sold him into slavery in Egypt. God used their plan for evil to save the whole family when Joseph rose to prominence in Egypt and provided food for the Israelites during a severe famine. Stephen remembered how years later the descendants of those same Israelites rejected Moses as their leader, but God eventually used Moses to deliver the people from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. In the same way, Stephen told the Sanhedrin, they had rejected God's Messiah and had Jesus put to death.

Then, in the verses just before the text we read this morning, Stephen made sure they got his point with these words, beginning in Acts 7:51:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.

It might not come as much of surprise when I tell you the Sanhedrin did not respond well to Stephen's history lesson.

You heard it in the passage we read at the beginning. They were enraged by what Stephen said to them. Then, to top it off, Stephen had a vision – right there in the midst of his trial before the Sanhedrin – he got a glimpse of heaven. He saw the glory of God and Jesus was standing at the Father's right hand. His vision was more than the Sanhedrin could take – it confirmed that the one they handed over to Pilate to be crucified and killed was the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of Man.

In a fury, they rushed Stephen, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death. So that was it – Stephen died. So much for that other old saying, "All's well that ends well" – right? I mean, it didn't end too well for Stephen. Or did it? Let's check that out. There is another person mentioned on the periphery of the story – did you catch who it is? It's Saul, the Pharisee from Tarsus, at whose feet those who stoned Stephen to death laid their cloaks. I am sure this incident was burned in Saul's memory and influenced his ministry when he became known as Paul, the great apostle to the gentiles.

And look at the verses that follow our passage at the beginning of chapter 8: "That day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria." Compare that with Acts 1:8 when the risen Christ tells his disciples what will happen in the coming days: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

It was the persecution that started after the stoning of Stephen that led to the fulfillment of Jesus' words to his disciples. That is what God used to move his people out from the home church in Jerusalem into the countryside of Judea and then the territory of Samaria. Eventually, the Lord sent Paul and others to the ends of the earth.

III. Can you see me now?

Isn't it amazing that God could use a tragedy like a wise, faithful, servant-hearted deacon being stoned to death by an angry mob to spread the gospel into all the world? So it makes me wonder – how might the Lord still be using those hard times in life to bring about his purposes?

On a personal level, I believe at least one of the truths we see in Stephen's story still applies to us. That is that sometimes it is in life's most difficult moments that we perceive Jesus most clearly. It was when Stephen's very life was on the line that God allowed him to see the resurrected Christ at the Father's right hand. When times are good, it can be easy for us to miss the generous providence of the Lord. But when the going gets tough, that tends to be when we look long and hard for some sign of God's presence and activity in our life.

A number of years ago there was a young couple with three small children who were facing challenging financial times. They shared their situation with friends from church and asked for prayer support. Just as the couple was reaching their wits' end, they found an unmarked envelope in their mailbox containing just enough cash to pay their most pressing bills. Over and over again during that season of their life, God provided for their needs in all kinds of creative ways. During that time they learned that sometimes it is in life's most difficult moments that we see Jesus most clearly.

Another truth that comes from Stephen's story is that God sometimes uses the challenges or tragedies we face to impact others for Christ. Stephen, as far as we know, was not trying to make an impact on Saul so he would become the Apostle Paul. But he did. Stephen did not set out to spur the spread of Christianity out of Jerusalem into the wider Roman world. But that's what happened.

When Pam Hawn was a struggling single mother, she did not know that her own experience with homelessness and scarcity would lead this year to God blessing more than 2000 children in need throughout Sarasota and Manatee counties. But that's what the Lord is doing. When Doug and Maxine Perry established the Eye Clinic in El Progreso, Honduras, they did not know that Doug had only a few years remaining in this life. Nor did they know that his passing would catalyze the relationship between the Eye Clinic, our congregation, and those in great need in Honduras. But that's what happened.

You see, sometimes it is in life's most difficult moments that we see Jesus most clearly – like Stephen did. If these are challenging times for you, perhaps this is a time when you need to know that the risen Christ is asking you the question: “Can you see me now?”