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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Acts 6:8-15, 7:1-3, 51-60, John 14:1-14

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵⁹And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60)

See the grace and the equanimity with which Stephen faces his death. Stones buffet him, bruises and blood spring forth, bones break, it becomes harder to draw each breath, yet with his waning breath he prays that this sin not be held against those who slay him. Such calmness and good will is a reflection in the disciple of the Master's own grace by which he could pray for those who crucified him, "Father, forgive..." We too are disciples of Jesus. We too should strive for such courage and for such grace.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, Jesus says to his disciples,

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. (John 14:1, KJV)

In the story of Stephen we see surrender to our Lord's invitation. When his world is collapsing around him and when death approaches, Stephen manages to let not his heart be troubled. He believes in God. He believes in Jesus. He is ready to depart and to fly to his Lord.

We would do the man an injustice if we supposed he had no love of life here below. No, the calmness of his heart as he faces death is not a reflection of weariness with life, but rather of love for Christ. He is not an old man, nor is he discouraged into silence. One day he is strong and active. The next day he is dying. It is a sudden change of life, yet Stephen seems ready for it. He seems to have lived as if each day was a day worthy of departing and being with his Lord.

Stephen was one of the founding members of an order of clergy we still need in the church. Stephen was a deacon. He must have been strong enough for the manual labor connected with that job, for deacons waited on the tables of the poor. They were public representatives of the church's charity. They walked the city, bringing food and clothing to the poor, especially to the widows of the church. I picture him walking the sidewalks, climbing the stairs day by day, as we do on Saturdays in our Meals on Heels program here at Immanuel.

Not only did Stephen need to be strong in body for such work, but also strong in character. He needed to be above reproach and he was. He was held in high esteem by the Christians of Jerusalem, and they were willing to entrust their alms to him for distribution to the poor.

But Stephen had strength and energy which went beyond his daily labors as administrator of the church's charity. Also, he was a preacher, and a powerful one, such that his opponents could not gainsay him. They could not resist the wisdom and the Spirit of the man, so they stoned him.

The death of Stephen, then, was the death of a man with every reason to live. He was honored in the church and he was strong in body and in eloquence. Yet when the stones began flying, he was ready. He knelt and prayed for those who were killing him.

The imagination, naturally, goes to the end of the story — to that great climax in which Stephen faces the stones. But let us not miss the earlier battle, when Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, for in that battle Stephen also displayed calmness and trust in God. Do not forget the smaller battles, I say, for the smaller battles are the ones we more often have to face. Not the flying stones, but the flying words can also hurt us.

Stephen's opponents have arranged for false accusations. False witnesses cry out against him. He is opposed, in a matter that means very much to him. Perhaps in the vehemence of the opposition he can already sense how things are going to play out. Maybe he can already perceive that he does not have much time left on this earth.

Yet how does he seem in face of such opposition? Is he troubled? Are their worry lines on his face? Does he look haggard? Frightened? No, hear what the Bible says concerning Stephen:

¹³and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.(Acts 6:13-15)

What is this miracle that can change a man into an angel? What is the secret that can cause of fellow who has every reason to be frightened to nonetheless seem perfectly calm, even transported with joy?

I believe the cause of this miracle was the gaze of Stephen. The origin of this wonder of grace was what he beheld — or rather, the One upon whom he fixed his eyes. His opponents are furious with him. They grind their teeth at him. Yet, Stephen maintains peace because of what he sees:

⁵⁴Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. ⁵⁵But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; ⁵⁶and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God."

There is an old principle of Christian spirituality that says we tend to become the one we look at in love. Therefore, seek to see Jesus in your daily life. Stephen gazed into heaven, beheld Jesus at the right of the Father, and became Christ-like in his seeing. And so it was that Stephen was able to die with words of forgiveness on his lips.

You and I know this human principle in our own humble ways. I still remember the lament of one of our homebound widows from many years ago now: "Oh, if only I could see my Charlie for another five minutes!" This dear woman's heart would be light again if only she could see her Charlie once more.

And so it was for me the last time I saw my dear old pastor, Raymond Shaheen. We journeyed to Susquehanna University to visit the dear man. It felt like a pilgrimage to Carol, the boys, and me, for we knew that Raymond was very elderly and we might never

see him again. And sure enough, he had that grace he had always had, perhaps even in higher measure, that when I was around him, I wanted to be a better man.

There are other people in my life whose mere sight tends to lift me upward. Oh! How it would do my soul good to see my mother again, to see my father! I must wait for heaven for that.

It is the same with you, I bet. There have been people in your lives who when you saw them or thought of them your heart lifted and you wanted to be even better than you are.

Let me tell you a fun recent story along these lines. This past Friday, Carol and I saw the Pope, Benedict XVI, at nearby St. Joseph's Church. It was ecumenical meeting with the Pope, when two hundred and fifty church leaders across the ecumenical church were able to gather with the Pope in a lovely, small setting. I was invited because of my long service on the Board of Directors of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. My wife Carol was there probably for many reasons, among them being her service as Chair of the Tanzania Companionship Committee.

We were all dressed in our clergy clothes. Carol and I wore our black clergy suits with white collars. Nuns wore their habits, Armenian Orthodox priests wore their black pointed hats, cardinals wore their red sashes and hats, and Pope Benedict was all in white. I have enlarged a photograph of him when he walked by us during the recessional and I can show it to you during Coffee Hour.

The whole service was inspiring, but let me tell you the special part of it for Carol and me. At the end of the service, when Pope Benedict was recessing, he walked down the aisle with his fine, shy smile on his face, with his hands clasped together. But when he reached Carol, he suddenly departed from his path, walked over to her, and shook her hand.

Carol has been floating ever since! People gathered around her, they were so excited for her. As Jenson said, that brief gesture probably did not amount to a general affirmation of women's ordination, and yet it was a warm word of encouragement to a sister clergy.

If ever a person had the chance to make you want to be better, Pope Benedict had that power for us.

But here is the even greater story. Consider this train of vision: Stephen beheld Jesus, and in the beholding became like him, such that he could die with words of forgiveness on his lips. And those who stoned Stephen placed their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. And so it was that Saul beheld Stephen, and in the end became a saint himself: St. Paul. Paul is the hero of the Book of Acts, but his story begins here, with his witnessing the death of Stephen. And on and on it went, much to the benefit of the church and of our world. Christians throughout the Mediterranean world beheld and imitated St. Paul, who in turn had beheld the martyr Stephen, who in turn beheld Jesus.

And that is the trick of life: To behold with the right Person.

The fact that Stephen saw Jesus, though Jesus had already died and ascended to heaven, was no mere random fact about Stephen, nor is it a private grace granted to the man. Rather, Stephen was a man of prayer, spiritual discipline, and devotion to Jesus. Somehow, Stephen has managed to become intoxicated with Jesus. He is drunk with faith. He sees beyond this world with all its threats to the One who is his good Saviour, and he willing to rest in Him.

Ultimately, the cause of Stephen's equanimity and grace as he endured martyrdom is revealed to us earlier Book of Acts. In Chapter Two, we read this summary of the conduct of the early disciples:

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.(Acts 2:42, KJV)

It was no accident or sudden gift of grace that permitted Stephen to bear with equanimity the opposition he faced. Rather, he was a man practiced in piety. He was a man of doctrine, fellowship, sacraments, and prayer. With these, as with tools, the Holy Spirit fashions us into better men and women. Why, perhaps the Spirit shall even fashion us into such people of peace that even our opponents will see in us something of the angels. Why not? It comes from gazing at Jesus and seeking to conform ourselves to the One deserving of our devotion and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.