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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Acts 7:55-60, 1 Peter 2:1-10, John 14:1-14
Saint Stephen

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's sermon is about Saint Stephen, the church's first martyr. For our opening text, let's listen again to the comforting words of our Gospel Lesson. In the King James Version, the text speaks of "mansions." Jesus says this:

¹Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.
²In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. (John 14:1-3, KJV)

Modern translations speak not of "mansions" but of "rooms." And I bet those modern translations are technically correct. But the old translation, "mansions," often seems better to me precisely because of its extravagance. Our God does not comfort by half measures. So many good people on this earth have pressed onward in faith and love, some of them staggering under burdens of poverty or ill health or heartbreak, but they have remained true to Jesus and to their neighbors. It pleases me to think of them in heavenly mansions, not just heavenly rooms. Indeed, I like to think of St. Stephen that way. He died, but died yielding himself into the hands of Jesus:

⁵⁹And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59, RSV)

And I like to think him a very happy man now to be with Jesus. I'd be glad for him to have a mansion.

CUT DOWN IN MIDSTREAM

I feel sad for Stephen — the way his life ended. I do not know him to be a young man. The text does not say. But I do picture him as a man who was cut down in midstream. He had found his place in this world. He had found his Savior, Jesus Christ. He knew for whom he meant to live henceforth. He was filled with "grace and power" (Acts 6:8, RSV). And he had found his vocation and path in life. Too soon, it feels to me, he was cut down. Let me tell you the story.

THE CONTROVERSY CONCERNING CHARITY

These things took place in the very early days of the church, in Jerusalem. In those early days of the church, the Christians of Jerusalem were all Jewish, but they were Jews of different sorts. One group were native Israelites. They spoke Aramaic. The other group were Jews, but from the Jewish diaspora. That is, they were Jews who had lived abroad in the Roman Empire. They might even have been born and raised abroad. This group had come home to Jerusalem, but they spoke Greek, not Aramaic.

These two groups of Jewish Christians were united in many ways. For example, they all worshiped in the temple there in Jerusalem. Being Christian did not mean that they abandoned the temple. Not long after this, the temple was destroyed by the Roman armies, but in these early days, Jewish Christians attended the temple together and had fellowship together in their homes. It is a happy picture:

⁴⁶And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47, RSV)

So far, so good.

But soon we hear of some conflict within this early Christian church. It concerned this division between the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians and the Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians. And Stephen, our hero, was part of the solution.

The conflict concerned the distribution of charity within the early church. Here at Immanuel, Parish Secretary Karen Rombey and I tend to take charge of that. In the early church, the responsibilities of administering the charity were weighty and complex. People contributed toward a common chest for the care of the poor among them. This was a world without the modern welfare supports that we know. The poor were desperately dependent upon the charity of others.

Especially the Greek-speaking widows from the Jewish diaspora were dependent upon the charity of others, because they did not have the help of husbands, nor of their families, for those families were often spread abroad in the Roman Empire.

Here is where there was trouble. The Greek-speaking Jewish Christians felt that their widows were being neglected. And maybe this is so. I mean, the apostles were the ones who administered the charity at first, and they might not have done a good job of it. They would not have meant to be unfair. It is just that the administration of charity requires a lot of listening, trying to judge the need and how best to help, trying not to run out of resources, record-keeping, appealing for more resources, converting those resources into money or some other usable form.

And the apostles might not have been trained for this sort of thing or very good at it. Besides, the apostles felt themselves called to concentrate on the holy ministry of Word and Sacrament.

So the early Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, created a new class of ministers to concentrate on the charity work of the church. Stephen was one of these new ministers. He was one of seven such ministers – the beginning of the traditional office of Deacon. The fact that he was selected to be one of the seven reflects well on him. It meant that he had the confidence of leaders in the congregation. Then the apostles laid their hands on him and prayed for him and for his work (Acts 6:6). He had found his vocation, I say. He had found his path in life.

Only, it did not last long.

LOVE VS. WINNING SOULS TO JESUS

I picture Stephen as a happy man for a while, for it is good when your hands are busy with noble work. I bet Stephen woke up happy each morning, eager to get going on his day. He did two sorts of things. He tended to the administration of charity within the congregation, and he preached the Word of God to the world. He practiced love and he preached.

So, first off, he did what all Christians are called to do: he loved his neighbors. In fact, it is not just Christians who are called to love our neighbors. All of humanity is called to this. God has planted that calling within the heart of all humans, whatever their religion or lack of religion. So, Thomas did what all people should do. He lent his hand to good works.

And secondly, Thomas contributed to the *distinctive* ministry of the church: he tried to win souls to Jesus Christ. He was a witness for Jesus. It was this part of his daily work that got him killed. He wasn't killed for his deeds of love. Rather, he was killed for one particular, but disputed form of love: He was killed for his witness to Jesus. But then, if the Church does not witness to Jesus, who will? It is the distinctive mission of the church to win souls to Christ and to teach them the faith of the Church. Stephen did this, and died for it.

STEPHEN BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

His opponents had him arrested and brought charges against him before the Sanhedrin — the great council in Jerusalem. It would have been politic for Stephen to have carefully chosen his words and to have de-emphasized Jesus. But this, he did not do. In the culmination of his speech, Stephen declares the very vision that had gotten Jesus crucified. Before Stephen, Jesus had spoken to Caiaphas about the “right hand of Power”:

And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.”⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you

will see the Son of man seated at *the right hand of Power*, and coming on the clouds of heaven. (Matthew 26:63-64, RSV)

With the result that Caiaphas tore his robes and accused Jesus of blasphemy. Now, Stephen affirms precisely what Jesus had said before 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*.”

The outcome is the same:

⁵⁷But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. ⁵⁸Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; (Acts 7:57, RSV)

COMFORTING STEPHEN

Stephen had run well the race that was set before him. He had no time left to say goodbye to his wife, no time left to hug his sons and say to them, “I am proud of you. I am honored to have known you.”

His death is brutal, for he was stoned, and yet it had an air of peace and goodwill about it. As he was dying, he prayed for the forgiveness of those who killed him, and the text simply says he “fell asleep” — asleep in the Lord:

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 7:60, RSV)

Stephen died with a vision of Jesus before him. We do not know whether Jesus in this vision spoke to Stephen, but if he did, I like to imagine him comforting Stephen with the words of our Gospel Lesson:

Let not your heart be troubled, Stephen. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions. I have gone ahead to prepare a place for you. And now you are coming to me. Come.

FIRST, BUT NOT THE LAST MARTYR

We honor Saint Stephen as the Church’s first martyr. Alas, he might be the first, but he is not the last. Throughout the ages, people have died for their witness to Jesus. There was a very moving story just this past week, for example, about an eight-month pregnant Christian woman in the Sudan who has been sentenced to be

hanged for apostasy.¹ She was also sentenced to one hundred lashes for “adultery,” which is her penalty for having married a Christian. The report said that the woman calmly listened to the judge and answered, “I am a Christian and I never committed apostasy.” God bless her.

Here in our land, we are spared such things as floggings and hangings for witnessing to Jesus, which is a great blessing for which we should give thanks to God. Still, in your life at work and in your particular social life, you might find yourself a bit shy to speak of Jesus. Not everyone is assertive. Not everyone can preach like Saint Paul. Perhaps you will need to win people to Christ in an old-fashioned way – in the humble but substantial way Christians have always won people to Christ: by the excellence of your life, by your high morality and integrity, by something lovely about you that is out of the ordinary and which might lead people to ask you what makes you tick? What is the principle of your life? Who is your Lord? Who is your Savior? Then I hope you and I will speak up for Jesus. And certainly our congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church, must do that, for Jesus asks us to do so, and if the church does not actually try to win souls to Jesus, the secular world is not going to do it for us.

Well, the critical moment came, and Saint Stephen stepped up to the batter’s box and took his best swing. He died, but the promises of Jesus about the heavenly mansions are meant for him too.

To Stephen’s Savior and ours too be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

¹ These things still happen, as in this recent, terrible story:
http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/magazines/allwoman/Sudan-judge-says-pregnant-Christian-woman-to-hang-for-apostasy_16676572