

“THE PROMISE AND THE PRICE”

**A SERMON BASED ON THE NEW TESTAMENT
BOOK OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (ACTS
7:55-60) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON
MAY 10, 2020----- (THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE
EASTER SEASON, 2020)**

OUR FOCUS THIS MORNING IS ON THE FIRST
CHRISTIAN MARTYR, STEPHEN. WHAT I HOPE
YOU’LL GET OUT OF THE SERMON IS A SIMPLE
MESSAGE:

GOD PROMISES LIFE IN ALL ITS ABUNDANCE
THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST; BUT WITH
THE PROMISE COMES A PRICE.

WE SEE THIS ILLUSTRATED IN SEVERAL WAYS IN
THE STORY OF STEPHEN.

THE STORY BEGINS WITH A SQUABBLE. IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE CHURCH, THE CHRISTIANS POOLED THEIR RESOURCES AND SHARED A COMMON WEALTH. A HIGH PRIORITY WAS TO PROVIDE FOR WIDOWS AND ORPHANS. TO THIS END, THEY DISTRIBUTED FOOD ON A DAILY BASIS. THIS SOON LED TO A PROBLEM: SOME WERE GETTING MORE THAN OTHERS.

TO RELIEVE THEM OF THE BURDEN, THE APOSTLES CALLED FOR SEVEN MEN OF GOOD REPUTE TO BE ELECTED AS DEACONS TO TAKE OVER THE FOOD DISTRIBUTION.

STEPHEN WAS ONE OF THEM. LUKE DESCRIBES HIM AS, “A MAN FULL OF FAITH AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” (ACTS 6:5) BY COMPARISON, HE ONLY NAMES THE OTHERS WITHOUT FURTHER COMMENT.

LET’S TAKE THAT TO MEAN STEPHEN WAS ESPECIALLY GIFTED. HE STOOD OUT ABOVE THE OTHERS. HE WAS EXEMPLARY. HE WAS ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO SEEM TO HAVE IT ALL TOGETHER, WHOSE MIND AND HEART ARE AT EASE IN EVERY SITUATION, WHO FLOW THROUGH LIFE WITH GRACE AND DIGNITY, WITH LITTLE EFFORT.

YOU'VE KNOWN PEOPLE LIKE THAT – THEIR SHOES SHINE, WHILE YOURS ARE SCUFFED; THEIR HAIR MIRACULOUSLY FALLS INTO PLACE WHILE YOURS LOOKS LIKE MINE-----AFTER ABOUT EIGHT WEEKS UNDER SELF-QUARANTINE AND WITHOUT A HAIRCUT!!!----- WHETHER THEY WERE BLESSED WITH BETTER GENES OR MORE ATTENTIVE PARENTS, THEY CAME OUT A CUT ABOVE.

STEPHEN WAS ONE OF THEM. BY THE GRACE OF GOD, HE SHOWED SUPERIOR PROMISE. BUT REMEMBER: WITH PROMISE COMES A PRICE.

HIS GIFTS WERE NOT FOR PRIVILEGE, BUT SERVICE. HE WAS ELECTED TO HELP DISTRIBUTE FOOD, TO CARE FOR WIDOWS AND ORPHANS. THAT ALSO INCLUDED THE POOR AND NEEDY, THE LAME, THE HOME BOUND, THE INFIRMED, THE DYING.

IN HIS FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS PAUL LISTS A VARIETY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS. HE SAYS SOME ARE GIVEN THE GIFT OF WISDOM; OTHERS, THE GIFT OF KNOWLEDGE; SOME, FAITH; OTHERS, GIFTS OF HEALING; SOME ARE ABLE TO PERFORM MIRACLES; OTHERS, TO PROPHECY. YOU GET THE PICTURE.

*THE POINT IS WHATEVER YOUR GIFTS, THEY
COME FROM GOD, AND THEY'RE TO BE USED
FOR THE COMMON GOOD. (1 CORINTHIANS 12:5-
10)*

*UNDERLYING IS A SIMPLE EQUATION: THE
GREATER THE GIFT, THE GREATER THE
RESPONSIBILITY TO USE IT FAITHFULLY. AS
JESUS SAID, "TO WHOM MUCH WAS ENTRUSTED,
OF HIM MORE WILL BE ASKED."* (LUKE 12:48 WEB)

SADLY, WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT'S LOST SIGHT OF THE CORRELATION. NOW WE'RE TAUGHT JUST THE OPPOSITE: TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN, MUCH IS TO BE ENJOYED. THE ONE WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS. IT'S ALL ABOUT ME....I WOULD SUGGEST BY THE WAY THAT THESE DARK DAYS OF COVID-19 OFFER A VERY REAL "REALITY CHECK" TO THIS APPROACH TO LIFE....

BUT NEVERTHELESS, I GET IT THAT THIS STILL MAY BE HOW THE WORLD SEES IT..... BUT IT'S NOT THE WAY GOD SEES IT. GOD GIVES US THE PROMISE OF LIFE IN ALL ITS ABUNDANCE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

WITH THE PROMISE COMES THE PRICE OF
SERVICE AND SELF-DENIAL.

NO ONE KNEW THIS BETTER THAN JOHN
WESLEY, WHO SAID,

I AM NO LONGER MY OWN BUT THINE.

PUT ME TO WHAT YOU WILT, RANK ME WITH
WHOM YOU WILT.

PUT ME TO DOING, PUT ME TO SUFFERING.

LET ME BE EMPLOYED FOR THEE OR LAID ASIDE

FOR THEE,

EXALTED FOR THEE OR BROUGHT LOW FOR

THEE.

**LET ME BE FULL, LET ME BE EMPTY.
LET ME HAVE ALL THINGS, LET ME HAVE
NOTHING.
I FREELY AND WHOLEHEARTEDLY YIELD ALL
THINGS TO THY PLEASURE AND DISPOSAL.**

**THE OTHER CHRISTIANS RECOGNIZED STEPHEN
AS A MAN OF EXTRAORDINARY GIFTS AND
ABILITIES, AND SO THEY ELECTED HIM AS A
DEACON. IN RETURN, STEPHEN ROSE TO THE
OCCASION AND BECAME A LEADER BY LOSING
HIMSELF IN SERVICE TO OTHERS. THE LESSON
FOR US TODAY IS CLEAR: GO AND DO LIKEWISE.**

STEPHEN NOT ONLY HELPED DISTRIBUTE THE FOOD TO THE WIDOWS AND ORPHANS, LUKE GOES ON TO SAY THAT, “STEPHEN, FULL OF FAITH AND POWER, PERFORMED GREAT WONDERS AND SIGNS AMONG THE PEOPLE.”

(ACTS 6:8)

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE GREAT WONDERS AND SIGNS STEPHEN PERFORMED? DID HE HEAL THE SICK, RAISE THE DEAD, CAST OUT DEMONS? ----- SCRIPTURE IS SILENT. WE’LL NEVER KNOW.

SAFE TO SAY IT WAS ENOUGH CATCH THE ATTENTION OF OTHERS – AND NOT ONLY FELLOW CHRISTIANS, BUT JEWS FROM ALL AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN – “CYRENIANS, ALEXANDRIANS, AND OF THOSE OF CILICIA AND ASIA.” (ACTS 6:9)

IN PARTICULAR, THERE WAS A HOTBED OF RADICAL EXTREMISTS KNOWN AS THE SYNAGOGUE OF THE LIBERTINES, OR FREEDMEN. LUKE SAYS THEY DISPUTED WITH STEPHEN, BUT “WEREN’T ABLE TO WITHSTAND THE WISDOM AND THE SPIRIT BY WHICH HE SPOKE.” (ACTS 6:9-10 WEB)

STEPHEN WAS A SKILLED ORATOR WHO SPOKE WITH ELOQUENCE AND PRECISION. HE WAS WELL VERSED IN THE TORAH AND JEWISH HISTORY. HE COULD HOLD HIS OWN WITH ANY RABBI OR SCRIBE..... WHEN IT CAME TO JESUS, HE WAS UNCOMPROMISING: JESUS WAS THE PROMISED MESSIAH, NO TWO WAYS ABOUT IT. THE FREEDMEN WERE NO MATCH FOR STEPHEN.

THAT LED TO A PROBLEM: WITH THE PROMISE OF SUPERIOR INTELLECT AND THE GIFT OF ARTICULATION CAME THE PRICE OF CONFRONTATION.

LUKE SAYS,

**“THEN THEY SECRETLY INDUCED MEN TO SAY,
‘WE HAVE HEARD HIM SPEAK BLASPHEMOUS
WORDS AGAINST MOSES AND GOD.’
THEY STIRRED UP THE PEOPLE, THE ELDERS,
AND THE SCRIBES,
AND CAME AGAINST HIM AND SEIZED HIM,
AND BROUGHT HIM IN TO THE COUNCIL ...”**

(ACTS 6:11-12 WEB)

***HAD STEPHEN BEEN LESS GIFTED, HE WOULD
HAVE NEVER BEEN NOTICED; HAD HE BEEN
LESS OUTSPOKEN, HE WOULD HAVE NEVER
POSED A THREAT TO ANYONE.***

***HE COULD HAVE STAYED UNDER THE RADAR
AND LIVED A LONG AND PEACEFUL LIFE. BUT
HE WOULD HAVE NEVER MADE A DIFFERENCE,
AND HE WOULD HAVE NEVER FULFILLED GOD'S
WILL FOR HIS LIFE.***

**IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT “THE QUICKEST WAY TO
MEET THE DEVIL IS TO TAKE A STAND FOR GOD.”**

**IT'S TRUE: AS LONG AS YOU'RE WILLING TO GO
ALONG WITH THE STATUS QUO AND BLEND IN
WITH THE MAJORITY, THE DEVIL WILL LEAVE
YOU ALONE. YOU'RE NO THREAT TO HIM.**

**BUT SPEAK UP, TAKE A STAND, BARE WITNESS
TO THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD, AND YOU'LL
CATCH FLACK FROM EVERY DIRECTION. NOT
ONLY WILL YOUR OPPONENTS TRY TO PUT YOU
DOWN, YOU'LL BE EXCLUDED FROM THE INNER
CIRCLE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS. THEY'LL
POLITELY DISMISS YOU AS BEING OVERLY
CONSERVATIVE AND REGRESSIVE.....PERHAPS
YOU WILL BE LABELED AS A RELIGIOUS OR
CHRISTIAN ZEALOT OR SOME SIMILAR AND NOT
TOO FLATTERING TERM**

STEPHEN STOOD HEAD AND SHOULDERS ABOVE THE REST; AS SUCH, HE MADE FOR AN EASY TARGET. WHEN THE FREEDMEN COULDN'T SHOOT HIM DOWN IN A FAIR AND HONEST DEBATE, THEY GOT DOWN AND DIRTY. THEY TRUMPED UP CHARGES AGAINST HIM AND BROUGHT HIM BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN, THE HIGHEST COURT OF THE JEWISH FAITH: THE GREATER THE PROMISE, THE HIGHER THE PRICE.

STEPHEN WAS NOW ON TRIAL FOR HIS LIFE. IT DIDN'T FAZE HIM IN THE LEAST.

AS ONE FALSE WITNESS AFTER ANOTHER
TESTIFIED AGAINST HIM, STEPHEN SAT
PERFECTLY CALM, AS IF THIS WAS THE VERY
MOMENT HE'D BEEN WAITING FOR. LUKE SAYS,

“ALL WHO SAT IN THE COUNCIL, FASTENING
THEIR EYES ON HIM,
SAW HIS FACE LIKE IT WAS THE FACE OF AN
ANGEL.”

(ACTS 6:15 WEB)

IN HIS SERMON ON THE MOUNT, JESUS
PROMISED BLESSINGS ON THE POOR IN SPIRIT,
ON THOSE WHO MOURN, ON THE PEACEMAKERS
AND THOSE WHO ARE MEEK AND MERCIFUL.

BUT HE RESERVED THE GREATEST BLESSING OF ALL FOR THOSE WHO WOULD BE PERSECUTED ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR FAITH IN HIM. HE SAID,

“BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN PEOPLE REPROACH

YOU, PERSECUTE YOU,

AND SAY ALL KINDS OF EVIL AGAINST YOU

FALSELY, FOR MY SAKE.

REJOICE, AND BE EXCEEDINGLY GLAD, FOR

GREAT IS YOUR REWARD IN HEAVEN.

FOR THAT IS HOW THEY PERSECUTED THE

PROPHETS WHO WERE BEFORE YOU.”

(MATTHEW 5:11-12 WEB)

THIS LITTLE KERNEL OF TRUTH CUTS LIKE A TWO-EDGE SWORD: THERE'S A BLESSING IN STORE FOR YOU IF YOU'RE WILLING TO SPEAK THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD IN LOVE; NOT SO IF YOU SIMPLY PARROT CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND GO ALONG WITH THE CROWD.

IT'S A HAUNTING QUESTION-----AND ONE YOU HAVE HEARD FROM THIS PULPIT BEFORE:

IF YOU WERE ON TRIAL FOR BEING A CHRISTIAN,
WOULD THERE BE ENOUGH EVIDENCE TO
CONVICT YOU?

HOW DOES WHAT YOU THINK, SAY AND DO
DIFFER FROM THE HAPPY PAGANS AROUND
YOU? HOW DOES THE WAY YOU LIVE CONTRAST
WITH THOSE WHO TAKE THEIR CUES FROM OUR
TIME AND PLACE AND CULTURE....FROM THE
SECULAR WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE

STEPHEN WAS A PARAGON OF VIRTUE. HE
TALKED THE TALK AND WALKED THE WALK. AS
A RESULT, HE FOUND HIMSELF DEAD CENTER IN
THE CROSSHAIRS OF THE JEWISH LEADERS.

WHEN IT WAS HIS TURN TO ANSWER THE
CHARGES LEVIED AGAINST HIM, HE WOULDN'T
SAY A WORD IN HIS OWN DEFENSE.

**INSTEAD, HE RECOUNTED THE MIGHTY ACTS OF
GOD – HOW GOD HAD MADE COVENANT WITH
ABRAHAM AND PROMISED TO MAKE OF HIM A
GREAT NATION ... HOW GOD HAD USED JOSEPH
TO SAVE THE PEOPLE FROM STARVATION AND
HOW, WHEN THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL BECAME
SLAVES IN EGYPT, GOD SENT MOSES TO
DELIVER THEM AND LEAD THEM THROUGH THE
WILDERNESS TO THE PROMISED LAND. HE
WENT ON TO RECALL THE GLORY DAYS OF
DAVID AND HOW SOLOMON, FULFILLED HIS
DREAM OF BUILDING A HOUSE FOR THE LORD –
A GLORIOUS TEMPLE MORE MAGNIFICENT THAN
ANYONE COULD HAVE EVER IMAGINED.**

**THEN STEPHEN WENT FROM PREACHING TO
MEDDLING. HE POINTED A FINGER AT THE
JEWISH LEADERS AND SAID,**

**“YOU STIFF-NECKED AND UNCIRCUMCISED IN
HEART AND EARS,**

YOU ALWAYS RESIST THE HOLY SPIRIT!

AS YOUR FATHERS DID, SO YOU DO.

**WHICH OF THE PROPHETS DIDN'T YOUR
FATHERS PERSECUTE?**

**THEY KILLED THOSE WHO FORETOLD THE
COMING OF THE RIGHTEOUS ONE,**

**OF WHOM YOU HAVE NOW BECOME BETRAYERS
AND MURDERERS.**

**YOU RECEIVED THE LAW AS IT WAS ORDAINED
BY ANGELS, AND DIDN'T KEEP IT!"**

(ACTS 7:51-53 WEB)

**LUKE SAYS WHEN HE SAID THIS, THE JEWISH
LEADERS WERE CUT TO THE HEART AND THEY
GNASHED THEIR TEETH AT HIM. STEPHEN WAS
HARDLY SURPRISED. WHAT ELSE COULD HE
EXPECT, ACCUSING THEM OF BETRAYING AND
MURDERING JESUS?**

NOR WAS HE PUT OFF. LUKE SAYS THAT BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT, HE GAZED UP TO HEAVEN AND SAW THE GLORY OF GOD AND JESUS – NOT SITTING, BUT STANDING – AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD ... AS IF JESUS HIMSELF WERE TESTIFYING ON HIS BEHALF.

IT WAS THE FINAL STRAW. STEPHEN SAID, “BEHOLD, I SEE THE HEAVENS OPENED, AND THE SON OF MAN STANDING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD!” (ACTS 7:56 WEB)

IT PUSHED THEM OVER THE EDGE. THEY CRIED OUT AT THE TOP OF THEIR LUNGS AND PLUGGED THEIR EARS.

THEN THEY DRAGGED STEPHEN OUT OF THE TEMPLE AND TOOK HIM BEYOND THE CITY WALL, WHERE THEY STONED HIM TO DEATH.

IRONICALLY, STEPHEN GOT THE LAST WORD.

EVEN AS THE STONES WERE BEING HURLED, HE

CALLED OUT, “LORD JESUS, RECEIVE MY

SPIRIT!” (ACTS 7:59 WEB) AND IN HIS FINAL

BREATH, HE UTTERED, “LORD, DON’T HOLD THIS

SIN AGAINST THEM.” (ACTS 7:60 WEB) WITH

THAT, HE DIED.

WHEN A SOLDIER OR POLICE OFFICER IS KILLED

IN THE LINE OF DUTY, WE RESPECTFULLY SAY,

“HE PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE.”

**THIS COULD CERTAINLY BE SAID OF STEPHEN:
HE PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE FOR HIS FAITH
AND DEVOTION TO JESUS CHRIST. HE'S THE
FIRST IN A LONG LINE OF CHRISTIAN MARTYRS.
BECAUSE OF HIS COURAGE AND HIS POSITIVE
INFLUENCE ON OTHERS, HE'S PROPERLY
RECOGNIZED AS A SAINT.**

**THE STORY OF STEPHEN CONTAINS AN
IMPORTANT FOOTNOTE. ACCORDING TO LUKE,
THOSE WHO CAST THE STONES ...**

**“... PLACED THEIR GARMENTS AT THE FEET OF A
YOUNG MAN NAMED SAUL ...
(THUS) SAUL WAS CONSENTING TO HIS DEATH.”**

(ACTS 7:58, 8:1 WEB)

THE APOSTLE PAUL WAS ONE OF THE ZEALOTS WHO PLAYED A PART IN STEPHEN'S DEATH.

WHILE HE MAY NOT HAVE CAST A STONE HIMSELF, HE WAS ONE OF THE GROUP.

LITTLE DID HE KNOW WHAT THE LORD HAD IN STORE FOR HIM..... FOR SAUL (LATER HIS NAME WOULD BE CHANGED TO PAUL) HAD THE BLOOD OF STEPHEN ON HIS HANDS WHEN THE LORD STRUCK HIM DOWN ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS AND CALLED HIS NAME AND TRANSFORMED HIM INTO THE GREATEST EVANGELIST THE CHURCH HAS EVER KNOWN.

**YET, WITH PROMISE COMES A PRICE. LIKE
STEPHEN, PAUL DIED A MARTYR'S DEATH
RATHER THAN FORSAKE THE FAITH. HE HAD NO
REGRETS. IN HIS SECOND LETTER TO TIMOTHY,
HE WRITES,**

“... THE TIME OF MY DEPARTURE HAS COME.

I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT. I HAVE

FINISHED THE COURSE.

I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH.

FROM NOW ON, THERE IS STORED UP FOR ME

THE CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS,

WHICH THE LORD, THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGE, WILL

GIVE TO ME ON THAT DAY;

**AND NOT TO ME ONLY, BUT ALSO TO ALL THOSE
WHO HAVE LOVED HIS APPEARING.”**

(2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8 WEB)

**I'D LIKE TO END WITH THREE QUESTIONS: WHAT
PARTICULAR GIFTS, TALENTS AND ABILITIES
HAS THE LORD GIVEN YOU? WHAT PROMISE
DOES YOUR LIFE HOLD FOR THE SAKE OF
CHRIST AND HIS KINGDOM? ARE YOU WILLING
TO PAY THE PRICE, FOR HIS SAKE?**

PONDER AS YOU WILL.....AND PRAISE GOD....

MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND FOR ME.....AMEN

