

Acts 6:1--7:2a, 7:44-60
14 April 13

Narrative Lectionary 080: Stephen

A Word of Encouragement!

The title of this message is “A Word of Encouragement.” I’m going to begin with conflict. Not just one conflict but with two. And then, as if that weren’t enough, I’m going to throw in a martyrdom. Feeling encouraged yet? No? Well, you will be.

OK, conflict #1: “Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.” Luke’s book of Acts in many ways paints an idealized picture of the early church and its growth. Yet even in this idealized picture, quite a few important conflicts are noted. There’s a dispute between Paul and Barnabas and later between Paul and Mark. And there’s this big council that has to be held because of all the of all the Gentiles that are coming into the church threatening to split it apart.

Conflict appears to be normal even when things are ideal. I hope you find this encouraging. Conflict is rarely fun. When a church is conflicted, some people get nervous. Some begin to think that there must be something wrong with us because this is a church, and we shouldn’t have conflicts in a church. But as the book of Acts clearly show, even when things are ideal, there is conflict. Conflict is normal. At the moment this parish is pretty much conflict free. That won’t last. Whenever you get a group of human beings together, there will be disagreements, and sooner or later we’ll find ourselves in that position. When that happens, don’t be discouraged. It’s normal, and it can, if properly and maturely dealt with lead to growth both spiritual and numeric.

That’s what happens here in today’s Scripture reading. The first of the two conflicts reported in today’s reading, like most of the conflicts in churches, is not theological, and therefore should not be church dividing. That churches do split over things that are not central to their beliefs is often sinful.

But there’s no split here. Oh, there are factions within the church. There are the Hellenists, whose native language is Greek and who likely are among those foreigners that Acts tells us are living in Jerusalem. And there are the Hebrews whose native language is Aramaic and who are natives. Conflict between natives and newcomers. Imagine that! But with mature leadership, they work it out. They appoint people to make sure each group is taken care of, and the ministry they are doing gets bigger. Conflict leads to greater ministry. And it leads to numerical growth. Acts puts it this way: “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

Conflict #2 is between Stephen and the council. This, too, is an in house conflict, a conflict among fellow Jews. It’s not handled well. Now, the Pharisees and Sadducees on the council are only trying to protect the faith of their ancestors. But in their effort to conserve what is true, they miss the ruth. Most of Stephen’s speech before the council is omitted in today’s reading. What

gets left out is a long re-telling of the history of Israel. Stephen's words about "stiff-necked people" who are "uncircumcised in heart" come straight out of the Old Testament. They are part of Israel's long standing tradition of self-judgement, confession, and repentance. And his speech reminds us that one of the best parts of the legacy we have received from Israel is the ability to use our own Scriptures as a means of self-criticism.

But the council before which Stephen appears isn't open to that. Nor is it open to the leading of the Spirit. And that leads to death. And then Stephen's death leads to growth as disciples fan out over the Middle East and Mediterranean worlds.

The way the Gospel progresses in the world is through death and resurrection. There is conflict within and without the Church, and that leads to growth. Death to Jesus leads to resurrection. Death to Stephen leads to the Gospel spreading outward from Jerusalem. The spiritual question I hear this particular Word of God encouraging me to ask is this: What death is called for in me, in us that will lead to resurrection and new life? What has to die so that something new can be born?

Here's some more encouragement: Luke reminds us that administration of and daily care for the internal needs of the congregation is also vital ministry, not something to be disparaged or devalued in the midst of other more exciting and outward acts of witness. Yes, it is good for the apostles to stay focused on the Word of God. It is good and right that a few should be immersed in the Word in a way that most people cannot be. But this does not make those people any better or more important, just different. Where would we be without one to run the copy machine, plan next Sunday's worship, minister to divisions between oldtimers and new arrivals, care for elderly widows, and faithfully administer church funds? All these are Holy Spirit directed service to God.

Stephen, for example, is appointed to wait on tables. But, guess what? He ends up doing what up until now only the apostles did—"great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8).

Be of good courage. The word of God advances. Because of us and in spite of us, the Word of God advances. Through conflicts and persecutions and death, the Word of God advances. Let us be open to the leading of the Spirit so that may advance through and among us.