

Service notes and sermon for Easter 4, May 3, 2020

Overview: On “Good Shepherd Sunday” our attention is fixed on Jesus the Good Shepherd of the sheep. His care and concern are recognized by those whom he has called as his sheep. Even in suffering, his sheep know his care for them and follow him.

Suggested Service is Service of the Word (CW p. 38).

Suggested Hymns: 399 “To God Be the Glory”

375 “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”

360 “The Lord My Shepherd; I’ll Not Want”

432 “I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb”

* Please feel free to sing additional hymns from the Easter section: CW 141-168.

Prayer of the Day: O Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Good Shepherd who laid down your life for the sheep. Lead us now to the still waters of your life-giving Word that we may abide in your Father’s house forevermore; for you live and reign with him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

First Lesson: Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60 Luke presents the history of Stephen and his martyrdom. Stephen speaks words of rebuke to those who shun the Good Shepherd, and he subsequently suffers at their hands. He dies speaking words of forgiveness reminiscent of his Lord’s words and is gathered in peace to his Shepherd’s caring arms.

Psalm is Psalm 23 (CW p. 72) The sheep of the Lord sing of his mercy, care, and love that guide them in this life and give them eternal rest in heaven.

Second Lesson: I Peter 2:19-25 Peter exhorts Christians to follow their Shepherd who has recalled them to himself for his mercy’s sake. Especially in times of suffering, they should remember the redemptive sufferings of Jesus, who died for them, and whose suffering leaves them an example to follow.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia. Alleluia. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Alleluia. (John 10:14)

Gospel: John 10:1-10 Jesus depicts himself as shepherd and sheep-gate in two brief parables. In the first, he is the shepherd who is contrasted with false shepherds. He enters the sheep pen rightfully, is recognized by the sheep, and leads them to pasture. In the second, he is the door to the sheep pen through which the sheep exit to find pasture. Our Savior is the One who cares for the sheep.

Sermon Theme: LORD, GIVE US SUCH FAITH

Prayer: CW p. 126. Lord's Prayer: CW p. 43.

Sermon Text: Acts 6:1-9, 7a, 51-60

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic-speaking community because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen. (7:2a) To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me!" (7:51-60) "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

MY DEAR CHRISTIAN FRIENDS,

As we look at our text for this morning we see Stephen, the first recorded martyr in the New Testament Church. In Stephen, we see a man of faith. We also see the challenges to his faith and how he remained faithful to his Lord and Savior. We see how Stephen didn't just have faith, but lived his faith. We see how Stephen's confidence in the Lord as his Shepherd went far beyond mere lip-service.

As we look at the example of Stephen, I think we would all have to ask ourselves: what if that were me in Stephen's place? What if it were me who was called upon to serve the Lord and to witness to his name? What if that was me who was being persecuted, then later dragged out of the city to be stoned for my faith in Jesus? How would my faith or your faith stand up? Would the last words from my dying lips be a prayer to the Lord to forgive those who were stoning me?

I don't know about you, but when I see the words of our text and what Stephen did in service to the Lord; the one thing I am not is over-confident concerning my own faith. When I look at my life and see that I have failed much easier tests of my faith and much lesser challenges to my faith, I am in awe of the faith that God is ready and willing to grant those who are his. When I see how God forgives me time and time again for when I fall short, I can only marvel at God's grace and forgiveness. Then, when we see the example of Stephen in our text, and when we know the grace of our Good Shepherd, it moves each and every one of us to pray: LORD, GIVE US SUCH FAITH! Lord, grant me such faith: I. Faith worked by the Holy Spirit. II. Faith to serve when called upon. III. Faith to witness to our Savior's truths. IV. Faith to die in the Lord.

What more could any of us ask than that our Lord God in heaven would grant to us the faith we see here exhibited by Stephen. It was faith in the heart of Stephen that was worked by the Holy Spirit. Stephen had been brought to faith when he heard the good news of his Savior. The Holy Spirit worked through the Word to bring him to faith and to strengthen that faith. Throughout the account of Stephen in the book of Acts we are told that Stephen was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. The two really go hand in hand. The Holy Spirit works through the gospel to instill and to strengthen faith in the hearts of believers. Stephen was man of faith, not by his own doing, but by the Holy Spirit's work in his heart.

Can it be said of you or me also that we are full of the Spirit? The Holy Spirit works in our hearts also. He works in our hearts through the gospel in Word and sacraments. He works to build in us the same faith that we see in Stephen. God desires that each one of us, if confronted with the same tests and challenges as Stephen, that we would react in the same way. When you or I look at Stephen, and then pray to God for such faith, we are asking the Holy Spirit to work through the Word to strengthen our faith and give us the confidence in our Lord and Savior; that we would in fact be like Stephen. We are praying for the Holy Spirit's work in our heart.

The Holy Spirit works through the Word. God is ready at all times to bless us, to strengthen our faith, to bolster our confidence through our reading, our hearing and our studying of the Scriptures. Lord, grant each of us Spirit worked faith!

Secondly, we pray for such faith that serves the Lord when called upon. Stephen was one whom the Lord had blessed with wisdom and faith. People recognized this. They saw that he was full of the Spirit. They selected him as one of their leaders. Stephen was ready and willing to take on the role God had given to him. He was ready to serve the Lord with his faith and with his talents. The Lord blessed his efforts.

I don't know that you or I are always as ready to take on the roles, the tasks, the jobs that God has called us to do. Stephen was really just an everyday Christian like you or me. Remember why it was that they were to choose these seven? It was so that the apostles would not have to be burdened with such tasks as "waiting on tables". The seven were to take over the ministry of caring for the widows and the distribution of food so that the other apostles could be devoted full time to the spreading of the Word. It appears, however, that these seven did much more than that, which is evident from Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin.

You and I also, each and every one of us, are called upon by God to fulfill various areas of service to God and his church. Stephen was not a pastor. He was not a priest. He was not an apostle. He was not a full time evangelist. He was a layman. He was a dedicated servant of the Lord. He told the good news about Jesus. He simply lived his faith; and his faith led him to serving the Lord in whatever capacity he was able.

The kingdom of God and the church of God still works in the same way. God calls his people to serve him in various ways with the talents and abilities, the resources and opportunities that God has given to each one of us. God's work is done by God's people.

We show our love for God and we exercise our faith when we serve the Lord in whatever way he has given us the opportunity to serve. We ask the Lord for such faith that we too, like Stephen, are always prepared for works of service and are always ready to say "yes" to the Lord when he places a task before us.

Third, we ask for faith to witness to our Savior and his Word. It is apparent that these seven who were chosen did more than see to the needs of the widows and orphans. As we are told in the case of Stephen, he took the opportunities before him to speak of the Savior and what Jesus had done for salvation. Stephen boldly spoke to the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council, concerning the truth about forgiveness through Jesus apart from the law. Stephen was not an apostle. Nevertheless, he was an evangelist as he spread the good news of Jesus and exhibited Spirit worked faith in his heart.

Stephen feared nothing in this world when it came to an opportunity to speak of the Savior. Can you and I say the same? In our time and in our society where the truths of God and his Word are not always welcome; are we ready to stand up for what we know and believe? Are we ready to put our life on the line for what the Holy Spirit has instilled in our hearts?

If you are like me, then I know that there are times you kept silent when you had the opportunity to speak of Jesus. If you are like me, there are times when you did not show the love of Christ in your heart to another person who needed to see that Christ-like love in you and from you and in your actions. God has forgiven you and me for those times—and he promises that you and I will

have yet more such opportunities to share his love and forgiveness to others in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our cities and towns, and throughout the world. Pray that the Lord give us such faith that we are able to witness to his truths and share his life giving Word to this dying world.

Finally, faith to die in the Lord. This is really the goal of every Christian: not only that we would live our faith in Christ, but that we also die in that faith. That is why we pray that God would keep us faithful to the end. What good is our faith if we are not faithful to the end? We, like Stephen, have that vision in our minds that we too will one day see Jesus at the right hand of God. His message had not been a welcome one to his audience. Our message may not always be welcome either. But Stephen was ready to stand for Jesus even in the face of death.

Are we ready to die in the Lord? Would we be ready to stand alone with the truth; defending our Lord and Savior as the killing stones were being hurled at us? Stephen knew that the Lord was his Shepherd. He knew that at the end of this life he would enter upon a new life with Christ in heaven.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." I hope that you and I will have that same sentiment as we approach death. We will want for Jesus to receive our spirit that we too may dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Perhaps it is the last words of Stephen that you or I would have the most difficulty with. He says, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Do not hold this sin against them. In that dying prayer that God forgive those who were stoning him, Stephen gives one of the best statements in the Bible for understanding God's forgiveness. There was an understanding by Stephen that as God had forgiven Stephen, Stephen was forgiving those who stoned him and asking God to forgive them. Yes, Stephen was ready to die. His faith was complete. He knew his forgiveness and he knew that God's forgiveness is for all people.

Lord, give us such faith: Faith worked by the Holy Spirit; faith that is ready to serve the Lord; faith to witness to our Savior; and faith with which we may die in the Lord to the sure hope of everlasting life. AMEN.