

## What Do You Stand For? – Acts 6:1-10, 7:51-60

Yesterday I had the privilege of officiating the wedding of Dan and Bryna. It was a wonderful day. Everything went so well until the middle of the service when it was time to say the wedding vows. Dan and Bryna had chosen to write their own vows, and when it came time for Bryna to say her vows, she froze. She is shy at the best of times, but now all eyes were on her and this was the most intense moment of her life. The words she had prepared to say just would not come. It could have been a disaster.

But it wasn't. Instead, it became a most touching moment as Dan stood across from her, her hands in his, encouraging her, comforting her, calming her. I had a front row seat as the love these two shared was demonstrated in a real way as Dan encouraged Bryna. Finally she was able to say a couple of sentences to express her love commitment to Dan, and we moved on. If I did not already know how special this couple was, I would have learned in that moment that they were truly there for each other. They understood what it meant to love, honour and cherish each other.

I remember watching a movie called a Knight's Tale about a peasant who assumes the role of a knight, jousting and fighting in tournaments under false pretences. He gathers around him a small group of friends who become quite closely knit. All is going well for the peasant until it is discovered that he is a fraud. He is arrested and thrown into prison, and his fate would likely be death. As he stands in the square, held in stocks and abused by the crowds, his friends come to his aid and challenge anyone who dare throw things at him or attempt to strike him. They were willing to die with him.

At this point the Prince makes his way through the crowd, and everyone bows. He makes his way to the prisoner, and demands he be released. The Prince declares that the peasant has noble blood. He tells the shocked peasant that if he knew nothing else about him, except for the fact that his friends were willing to die for him, that he knew he had the making of nobility. The Prince knights the peasant and he goes on to fight in the tournament, a true knight now.

What strikes me about these two stories is the fact that the character of the person is revealed in his actions. They did not need to say anything, for how they acted spoke volumes.

That is true for the man who is the focus of our text this morning, Stephen.

Stephen is best known as the first Christian martyr, but what else do we know about him? What kind of man was he that he would die for the cause of Christ? What did he stand for?

Let's start back in chapter 6 where we are first introduced to Stephen.

There is a crisis in the early church. Despite all the great things happening, and the sudden growth in the church, there were factions. The Hellenistic Jewish Christians and the Hebraic Jewish Christians were at odds about how the widows were being treated.

Can you see what is happening here? First, almost all the Christians in the church are from Jewish backgrounds. The Hebraic Jews saw themselves as the pure Jews, living in Judea and speaking Aramaic. The Hellenists had lived in foreign countries and spoke Greek.

It could be that the snobbish attitude of the Hebraic Jews caused the problem, a shortage of food and support for the widows among the Hellenists. The Jewish tradition was to collect an offering each Friday to distribute to those in crisis and those who were destitute. It appears the early church continued this tradition, but somehow *some* of the poor among them, the Hellenistic widows, were not being cared for.

It seems to happen all too often, that groups can be divided into the insiders and the outsiders. In churches it can be the long time attenders vs the newcomers, the seniors vs the youth, or the immigrants vs the long time Canadians. Satan loves to put wedges between people, dividing and causing factions. However Jesus comes to reconcile people, to bring them together and make them united. Just before Jesus went to the cross he prayed this prayer for his disciples, "May they be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you." (John 17:21)

Those things that divide us are not from God.

The disciples decided that it would be best to choose seven men to look after this situation, men who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (vs. 3).

Interesting how all tasks within the church require the ministry of the Holy Spirit. One might think handing out provisions to the widows was not a terribly spiritual ministry, but the early church did not see it that way. Whenever we work together, we need the Spirit to be at work to keep us united and humble.

Here is where we meet Stephen. He is chosen to be one of the seven because he is a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He is introduced to the disciples, who prayed for him and they laid hands on him. This was a sign that they were conferring authority to the seven. It is very much like an ordination service in the Church of the Nazarene where the designated authority, the General Superintendent, lays hands on the ministry candidates and prays for them, conferring on them the authority to be a pastor. 34 years ago this month the General Superintendent laid his hands on me and prayed for me, and I became an elder in the Church of the Nazarene. I still vividly remember that night, as it was very significant for me. The call I felt on my life was confirmed by the church.

Stephen has been chosen to help minister to those who were in need. But he did not stop there. In verse 8 we read that "he was full of God's grace and power" and he "performed great wonders and signs among the people." Do you have a need? Call Stephen. He will pray for you! He was also full of wisdom, and those who opposed his message about Jesus found they could not win an argument against him. The Holy Spirit within him gave him the words to speak and the wisdom to know what to say.

The Holy Spirit still does that today. How many times have you gone into a situation where you did not know what to say, and so you prayed God would help you, and sure enough, you were able to say something that ministered to those in need? Many times I have prayed in my car as I headed to the hospital or to someone's home where there has been a crisis, "Lord, I do not know what to say. Help me." And God always has given words to help in that situation.

Stephen knew how to let the Spirit guide him, even in his words, and many people were helped by him. But there also were those who opposed him. Since he was not doing anything wrong they made up false charges against him, and had him arrested. He was dragged before the Sanhedrin, the highest court in the Jewish nation, and there they accused him of many things, all of them fabricated.

Then look at verse 15. Those religious leaders, sitting in judgement of Stephen, looked at him and saw that “his face was like the face of an angel.” There was a peace, and tranquility about him despite their hatred and lies. They could see the presence of God in his life, even if they did not want to admit it.

Oh, may people see the presence of Jesus in our lives. May even those who disagree with us, who may even hate the name of Jesus, see that we are different. There is not hatred and anger in us – shame on us if the world only knows what we are against, and sees us as angry people who think they are better than everyone else. May they see the glow of Christ’s presence within us, genuine love and compassion and grace towards all people, especially those we disagree with.

Stephen is given a chance to speak, and so he recounts the story of God’s people, starting with Abraham and taking them to their present day. He challenged them to see that the people known as the heroes of the faith were people who listened to God and obeyed his voice. He challenged them to see that God is bigger than the temple, and before there was a temple, there was worship of God. Finally, he says that because the religious leaders preferred their traditions to the voice of God, they were complicit in not only killing the prophets but also Jesus. Jesus, the promised one from God, the Messiah and Saviour.

The religious leaders were furious, and were ready to do away with him. At that moment God gave Stephen a vision of heaven where he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. That is a most interesting picture, as usually we read that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. Stephen sees him standing. Some scholars believe that Jesus is standing, ready to welcome Stephen home...

The religious leaders have had enough, and they grab Stephen, drag him out of town and start to stone him. As they throw stones at him, pelting his body with those terrible projectiles, Stephen prays. He actually prays two prayers.

First, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen is praying to Jesus, his God. If ever he had any doubts to who Jesus was this would be the time to say so. But no, Stephen is sure about who Jesus is. He is God, the God to whom he will pray even on death’s door.

The second prayer is this, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (v. 60). Can you hear what is happening here? Stephen is forgiving the very ones who are killing him. He does not call down a curse on them – which I am afraid many people would do today – but instead he pleads that God would show them mercy.

Stephen dies at the hands of the religious leaders. Scripture reads that “he fell asleep.” This once again reflects the certainty that Christians have that death does not get the last word. We will rise again.

Stephen was a man who was willing to give his life for the cause of Jesus. He gave his life to serving the widows, sharing the Good News about Jesus, and loving all people, even his enemies. This reflects a man who has been transformed inside to live not for himself but for Jesus.

He would stand up for Jesus no matter what the cost. Humble service, human opposition, even death. We know nothing else about Stephen except he was a man of wisdom and full of the Holy Spirit. Though we do not know how old Stephen was, one gets the impression he was not that old as he was called upon to serve others and do chores around the church. We might think it was a terrible tragedy, a real shame, that such a promising young man would be murdered like this. He may even have had a family: we do not know.

But Stephen was ready to die for Jesus. He would live for Jesus. He would die for Jesus. He took his stand as a follower of Jesus no matter what it cost him. Therefore, God’s record of history honours him as the kind of man that brought honour to the name of Jesus.

This Father’s Day I cannot help but ask the men, what do you stand for today?

We are conditioned by society to stand for our careers, or our politics, or our special causes. Yet Stephen showed us a different way – he stood for the cause of Christ, no matter what the cost. Men, are we ready to do this?

Fathers are given the responsibility to care for their families. Jack told me of some birds that have built a nest in a flower pot by their house. When he tried to take a peek at the little chicks within the nest he was attacked by the father bird. This father would protect his family from harm. Dads, will we protect our families from a society that wants to squeeze our children and homes into a mold that has no room for God?

Will we, like Stephen, let the Holy Spirit so fill our lives that He can direct us, and use us to point others to Jesus?

Of course Stephen’s example is not just for the men, for women must also choose what, or who, they will stand for. But this Father’s Day I am reminded that men are called to be leaders by God, starting in their homes.

Today I remember my father, who took me to church every Sunday, who taught me to read my Bible by example, who taught me to put God first in my life by his example and his instruction to me. I remember a dad who would not compromise, and would always do what was right and pleasing to God, even if it cost him his job. I remember a dad who took his stand for Jesus. I pray my children will see the same in me.

What about you? What will you stand up for? Justice? Freedom? The environment? Canada? Your political party? Or will you stand up for Jesus? Dads, would you stand with me for Jesus?