

## STEPHEN'S SUCCESSORS

Rev. Bruce J. Roffey

New Hope, King City and York Pines United Churches

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About whom do you think when you picture a Christian? Who is a model or example for you of what a Christian is? Would it be one of the ancient ones? One of the original, high profile ones, like Peter or Paul? Would it be one of great compassion, like Mother Teresa, or the mystical St. Francis? Might it be someone active in social justice like Viola Desmond, Tommy Douglas, or Desmond Tutu? Or do you think of more ordinary people, everyday people, perhaps those whose troubling circumstances you know yet who remain confident and hopeful, even joyful and happy, or those who work for justice with compassion with refugees, at the Food Bank or advocating for the homeless and marginalized, or those who teach our children or accompany our youth, or those who devote themselves and their time to caring for others, perhaps especially those in this time of pandemic?

Is it someone ordinary who exemplifies for you the word 'Christian'?

All of these from honoured to humble are suitable examples and models, none perfect but all suitable.

About whom do you think?

I offer you this morning Stephen. I offer you Stephen, early witness and first martyr for Christ as a model, an example of a Christian, and I suggest to you that we are Stephen's successors.

We are heirs of his legacy, holders of his tradition as our own, followers of the same way he walked, the way of Christ, bearers of the same truth, the truth of God's love in Christ, those alive with the same life, the life bestowed upon us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

I think that Stephen is a very suitable example because he was an ordinary person like you and I. He was not prominent. He didn't have a position of importance. When a replacement for Judas Iscariot was sought his name was not proposed.<sup>i</sup> He was not an Apostle. But he was a good man. He had a good reputation. He, like others, was full of the Spirit,<sup>ii</sup> and it was recognised that he had wisdom; he could be counted on to be fair and just, to be compassionate. And so when a controversy

arose about inequities in the daily distribution of food among widows of Greek or Hebrew descent, he was chosen as one of seven to resolve this.<sup>iii</sup>

The Apostles couldn't do it. They had other things to do. They needed to be immersed in prayer and devoted to the ministry of the word, to teach and to preach. How else would the good news be shared, except by preaching and teaching? "We can't give that up to serve tables," they said.<sup>iv</sup> They had spiritual things to do, so this temporal matter, this practical matter, needed to be entrusted to practical and reliable people of good reputation, but more or less ordinary people, for this ministry of service. They would be deacons or stewards responsible for the stewardship of the church's benevolent offering.

So the Apostles prayed for them, for Stephen and for the others. They laid hands on them for the renewal of the gift of the Spirit to equip them for this practical but delicate task, and sent them on their way. Of the seven, Luke only describes one and that is Stephen, of whom he says that he was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

And then something happened to Stephen. His faith overflowed.

Chuck Meyer has an interesting way of speaking about God that illuminates this. Do you know how to check whether a microwave oven is leaking? You hold a fluorescent light bulb near it as it operates. If the bulb glows, the oven is leaking. Our God, says Meyer, is a leaking God, a living, leaking God.<sup>v</sup> You can see that leaking in the people who glow with God's glory, whose eyes smile with God's joy, whose hands touch with God's compassion and kindness, whose faces radiate with God's gentleness, whose lives are lived differently, even if ordinarily.

Stephen leaked God's glory. We don't know what Stephen actually did. They are called wonders and signs.<sup>vi</sup> Stephen is seen as one who is full of grace and power. He clearly exhibits gifts from God's grace, which have influence and power over people and with people. In the sharing of his faith in the ministry of service, they saw God.

The story indicates that the Word of God increased, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. It doesn't say why that was.<sup>vii</sup> Was it because the Apostles were now freed from the mundane for the spiritual, and could preach and teach? Or was it because Stephen preached and taught the spiritual through the mundane? His actions were good news speaking loudly, perhaps more loudly than words.

I think it was both of these. Certainly, whatever Stephen was doing was so successful that it was infuriating the members of his synagogue. Some brought charges against him and, as with Jesus, produced false witnesses who lied about his message.<sup>viii</sup> But – and this is key – when they gazed at him, “all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”<sup>ix</sup> I think that’s what everyone saw. God leaked out through Stephen. With Stephen, there was such a sense of God’s presence that his presence preached the good news.

Why was that? Because he knew God. He experienced the presence of the risen Christ daily continuously. The Holy Spirit resided within him.

There is a story told about an elderly man and a younger, more accomplished one who found themselves on the same platform before a vast audience. As part of the program, each was asked to recite something from memory.

The younger man, trained in oratory and elocution, recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm much to the pleasure of the audience who applauded with admiration. They asked for an encore so wonderful was his voice and presentation.

Then the older gentleman came forward, leaning heavily on his cane. He stepped to the front of the same platform and to the dismay of some began to repeat the same words, but with a feeble and shaking voice, “The Lord is my shepherd....” When he finished there was no sound, no applause, only silence. Folks seemed to pray. In the silence that followed, the younger man stood and spoke, “Friends, I wish to make an explanation. When I repeated the Psalm you asked for an encore, but when my friend spoke, you remained silent. This is the difference: I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd.”<sup>x</sup> That’s how it was with Stephen. He knew God, and people could see and hear and feel in him that he knew God, and it was good news to them.

The great preachers are not those with a silver tongue but those with a burning heart. Great sermons seldom read well in print because the heart of the message comes from the presence of the messenger, from love and zeal and not just words. In one of his books, Arthur Koestler has a communist declare that courage is just a matter of glands, a matter of one’s makeup, like the shape of one’s nose. But Christian courage is not the result of glands; it is the consequence of convictions. Those who dare greatly believe greatly.<sup>xi</sup> Stephen had great faith, and people knew it and experienced good news.

The difficulty for most of us is in recognising that our ordinary lives also might be examples for others, that how we live might exemplify the Christian faith, and that God's glory might leak out through us.

Stephen, after all, ended up dead by execution by stoning. Most of us, all of us, don't want that. Stephen didn't want it either. He didn't seek it, but he got so caught up in living faithfully that he didn't see what was coming. He didn't see the falling rocks. He saw only God, and the ministry he did on God's behalf.

And when we look at the other laudable and honoured, recognised and famous examples of the faith, we don't really want to be like them either, do we? We don't want to give up what we have, to sacrifice our comforts and conveniences to live like them. But none of these people when we read their stories sought the end to which they came. What they sought was to be faithful. What they had was the presence of Christ, risen and living, to guide them.

We are not called to die for our faith. We are, however, required to live it and living it can be threatening enough. I remember a construction worker at a conference once who said that he had never shared his faith with people at work because he thought they would ridicule him. We are required to live our faith totally and not just partially. We are required to trust God, to depend on Jesus, to live the fullest life we can and to share that life with others and to help them live full lives as well. And what you need to believe is that your ordinary life can make a difference.

Fraser was only a few years older than I, but when he was dying he spoke to me with regret about his contributions to the church. He had always served in administration with property and finances, but particularly computers and accounting. He regretted that he hadn't done something more spiritual. When he died, I heard over and over again what a difference Fraser had made in people's lives. It wasn't his expertise in computers and programming. It was his wisdom, his faith, his caring. At meetings, he was quiet but when he spoke he could bring calm into strife, order into chaos. He could refocus people, foster clarity and bring about resolution. Through their ordinary lives, Fraser and Stephen show us what it means to be Christian and to witness to our faith.

What I especially want to draw your attention to this morning, what I especially want you to hear as Stephen's successors, is not to look to Stephen as our model to copy so that we should live like him, doing what he did, saying what he said.

I want you instead to look to the One he followed, the One who inspired his living, the One who leaked out of his life, the One who accompanied him, the One who empowered his living, the One who received his spirit. This same One is there for you, with you here and now and always.

This same One fills your life, guides you to live differently so that your ordinary life might be a witness for the world around you so it might behold the love of God, the caring and compassion of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is your living legacy from Stephen and your inheritance as Stephen's successors.

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 1: 21-26.

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 6: 5.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 6: 1-7.

<sup>iv</sup> Acts 6:2.

<sup>v</sup> Chuck Meyer, *Dying Church Living God* (Kelowna, B.C.: Northstone, 2000) p. 59.

<sup>vi</sup> Acts 6: 8.

<sup>vii</sup> Acts 6: 7.

<sup>viii</sup> Acts 6: 8-15.

<sup>ix</sup> Acts 6: 15.

<sup>x</sup> Told in Charles L. Allen, *God's Psychiatry* (Spire Books, 1953) p. 38.

<sup>xi</sup> Edward Cragg, *Mission Unhindered – Studies in the Book of Acts* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1961) pp. 16-17.