

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on May 14, 2017	On the occasion of the Fifth Sunday after Easter, A

Acts 7:55-60

Forgiven First

In Acts chapter 7 we hear the end of the story of Stephen, one of the first seven deacons and the first Christian martyr. His story parallels Jesus' in many ways. Falsely accused of heresy, Stephen is dragged before the Sanhedrin, the same Jewish council that tried Jesus. In the part of the story we did not hear, that precedes the verses in our first reading this morning, Stephen makes an extended and inspired defense in which he retells, practically from the beginning, the story of God's salvation of the Children of Israel and how at every turn they rejected God's Word and the prophet who delivered it, and he ends with a scathing condemnation of those who rejected Jesus, the embodied Word of God. Even as Stephen prophetically accuses them of rejecting and killing God's prophets as their ancestors did, they become enraged and attack him. This is where our reading today picks up. Stephen is granted one final ecstatic vision of Jesus in his glory with God. That proves to be the final outrage to this now angry mob. They rush him, drag him outside of the city, and stone him to death.

Stephen fulfills the model of martyrdom that Jesus pioneered on the cross. He even paraphrases the same Psalm that Jesus did just before he died. "Lord Jesus," he says, "receive my spirit." And just as Jesus prayed for God to forgive those who were in the act of crucifying him, Stephen prays that God would not hold the sin of his death against those who are in the process of murdering him. Stephen witnesses to the saving love of God embodied in Jesus to his very last breath. He demonstrates that a faithful and courageous death is not only something that our Lord is capable of, but anyone who chooses to follow him can have the same grace in the face of injustice, suffering, and humiliation.

One other detail of this powerful story is included in these few verses. Those who stone Stephen lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. If we had read the very next verse this morning, we would have heard these words, “And Saul approved of their killing him.”

This Saul sounds like a stone-cold, heartless dude. In fact, he is a very educated and committed pharisaic Jew. He, like the others in the crowd, believes that he is doing the right thing in stoning a heretic. Yet we find out much later that this experience had a profound impact on him. Unfortunately, the impact of Stephen’s witness does not become immediately apparent. Immediately after the death of Stephen, Saul commences to lead a violent persecution against anyone in Jerusalem who calls Jesus Lord and Messiah. His active persecutions grow and even take him to other cities to capture and bring Jesus’ followers back to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem.

Saul, of course, later undergoes a dramatic conversion and becomes known as Paul—a zealous preacher of the Good News, a planter of congregations, the most prolific of the New Testament writers, and an architect of the Church. Paul is a true hero of the fledgling Christian faith. He himself dies a martyr’s death in Rome, only after earning the title of Apostle and advancing the Jesus movement arguably more than any other individual in the early decades of the Faith.

Saul’s conversion to become Paul is indeed a powerful story itself, but it is a story for another sermon. Today we focus on Stephen’s prayer for all those who were present and took part in his stoning death. Stephen, like Jesus, prayed for his executioners. He prayed for their forgiveness. God surely listened to such a prayer. We may not be able to imagine having the presence of mind, not to mention the mercy and compassion, which it took for Stephen to pray such a prayer, but let’s just assume that God granted him his petition, and forgave those present

of their sin. That would mean that Saul, the as yet unrepentant persecutor of Christians, walked away that day from the still warm body of Stephen laying in the street outside of Jerusalem, a forgiven man.

What was it that had such an impact on Saul that day? Was it the witness of Stephen, his faith in God's grace, his vision of glory, his willingness to turn the other cheek? Or was it that God was revealed to him that day? Was it that Saul undeniably came face to face with the God of forgiveness and mercy, the God who did not withhold his own Son so that those who were still sinners could be washed clean in his blood? Later when Saul is struck blind and hears Jesus' voice, and goes through the steps that lead to his conversion, we cannot help but figure that the seeds of that conversion were planted on that day when Stephen prayed for his forgiveness. When Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus he recognized him, even in his blindness, because he first encountered him in the face of Stephen.

Two questions:

1. Do we understand and continually hold on to the fact that our primary identity as followers of Jesus Christ is that we are forgiven sinners?
2. Who do *we* pray for, and how do we pray for them?