

When We Get It Wrong
Acts 7:51-8:3
The Reverend Mary Kathleen Duncan
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⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³ You are the ones who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” ⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.

⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. ¹ And Saul approved of their killing him.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

In his song, “Long Violent History,” contemporary Appalachian musician, Tyler Childers, sings-

*It's the worst that it's been since the last time it happened
It's happening again right in front of our eyes
There's updated footage, wild speculation
Tall tales and hearsay and absolute lies*

This week's theme is violence, discord, and sinfulness in the community of faith. Whew. Sorry, y'all. It's heavy, I know. But when we embarked upon this sermon series, we essentially agreed to preach through the breadth of the narrative that is the book of Acts. And while we cannot preach on every character, passage, or story, there are some that we cannot leave out and I think the story of Stephen is one of those. Stephen is an important character who is first introduced in Acts 6. The early church realizes that they have an organizational behemoth on their hands. They are growing in number.

There are a lot of needs – preaching the good news in Jerusalem, helping the poor and suffering, traveling to areas that haven't heard the good news, healing the sick, and so on. It's much like the needs we have as a church in the 21st century. But we have a session. A staff. And lots of lay leaders. We have an org chart. Stephen was chosen, along with six others, to be part of the serving ministry. Almost like the head of pastoral care for the early church. They would see to the needs of the hungry, the poor, those in need of extra care. We quickly find out that Stephen is very gifted at this work. Acts 6:8 tells us – “Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.” Naturally, people didn't like this. And they turned against Stephen. Almost the whole of chapter 7 is Stephen's speech (or sermon) before the religious council of the Temple and the high priest. The chapter concludes with Stephen's stoning and death.

This is not an easy story to read, hear, or study. By any means. Like the news these days, we just want to close the Bible, put it away, and forget it exists? Right? I know I do. But when I take a deep breath, put away distractions, and sit with this story, I hear truths and cautions that we NEED to hear in today's world. Stephen was proclaiming the same gospel of love and peace that we proclaim today. He was following the same Spirit that is among us right here and right now moving us toward compassion, reconciliation, care, and maybe even change.

My immediate thought when sitting with this story was the 1948 short story by Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery”. Do y'all remember that story? I was assigned to read it in a middle school English class. The setting is familiar. A village. A small town. A community of people. A summer day. And their annual festival celebration before the harvest. At the end of the celebration a lottery will happen. What the winner receives, the reader does not know, but the lottery is a tradition that happens every year. Throughout the ground-breaking short story, readers get

to know the characters in the town. The postman. A mother. Old man Warner. A group of school children. The entire community gathers on the square where dances and holiday celebrations happen for the lottery. They gossip and talk about their to-do lists. The children go out and collect stones. Who can find the smoothest one? The roundest one? The perfect one? Each child adds at least one stone, rock, or pebble to the pile.

The way the lottery works is that first, a family name is selected. Then a second drawing occurs and one member from that family is chosen as the winner. Out of the whole town of 300 people, the Hutchinson family is chosen. Then slips of paper are put into a box – one for each of the five family members – mother, father, and three children. The mother, Tessie Hutchinson's, slip is chosen. She has won the lottery.

And the entire village, including Tessie's own husband and children, pick up a stone from the pile the children have amassed and begin to stone her to death.

I then thought of the story of Oscar Romero. Have you ever heard of him? He was a Catholic priest in El Salvador. Born in 1917, he was educated in El Salvador and Rome, ordained in Rome, and then spent his entire ministry in his home country. He faithfully served his people – tending to the poor, standing up against corruption, working for justice for all people, helping those struggling with addiction, and doing all the ordinary things a priest does – caring for the community in times of grief, baptizing babies, serving children their first communion, marrying young couples. Not a super political or outspoken leader, Romero couldn't be silent when a civil war began to rage in his country. There was intense violence. People simply disappeared, never to be heard from again. Romero's sermons began to be broadcast over the radio, and he would speak against the violent acts of the government. He would read the names of those who had disappeared, he would speak against murder and torture, he would implore Christians to stand up to the violent regime. To refuse to do their bidding. He became a voice and a symbol for hope to the regular people of his country. And the government couldn't abide with that. Oscar Romero was gunned down in the middle of celebrating mass on March 23, 1980.

In both of those contemporary stories I've shared, like the Biblical story before us today, the people think that violence will solve something. It will shut someone up. It will preserve a long-held tradition. It will keep someone's power at bay. It will appease the universe, or the gods and we will find favor. We think we are beyond

it, but we aren't. Like Tyler Childers sings, "It's happening again right in front of our eyes." It happens. All the time. In communities like ours. In communities bigger than ours.

In communities smaller than ours. People think they can control others with violence. And we close our ears to this horrible reality. And we close our hearts to protect ourselves and our people from their horrors.

Ears and hearts. Necks and teeth. These body parts and organs are a key part of this passage. In Greek they are *osin* and *kardia*, *trachea* and *odontas*. All located from the chest up in our bodies. The passage begins with the final words of Stephen's speech before the council. In verse 51 he refers to them as a "stiff-necked people" with "uncircumcised hearts", meaning they are inflexible to the movement of the Spirit in their midst, and they are resistant to God's work upon the heart. In our translation, verse 54 states,

"When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen." A more literal translation, directly from the Greek, would read,

"Hearing these things now, they were cut in the hearts of them and began gnashing the teeth at him." Something Stephen said spoke to their hearts and they couldn't bear it. And gradually, they resorted to violence. Starting with the clenching of the jaw, continuing with the closing of the ears, ending with running toward, stones at the ready. In our translation, verse 57 states, "But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him." Once again, a more literal translation, directly from the Greek, sounds a bit different, "Having cried out, then, in a voice loud, they held the ears of them and rushed with one accord upon him." One accord. This phrase is used several times earlier in the Acts narrative when believers do things like pray together, share their possessions, and add to the number in the church. Isn't that something we desire as human beings? As Christians? To be of one accord with each other? To be united? But not like this. Not united in violence.

Since we're preaching on Acts this summer, your pastoral staff has shared lots of great resources with each other – books, articles, biblical commentaries. One of our favorites is Matthew Skinner's book, "Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts". The title of his chapter on the stoning of Stephen says it all, I think, "Using Violence to Keep God Under Control". Of the people who did this to Stephen, this is what Skinner writes, "The people who batter Stephen's body are not local thugs...They are, at least from all appearances,

upstanding religious folk: regular members of the synagogues, committed leaders, religious professionals, and priests. They are guardians of valued traditions.”¹

Does any part of this passage sound familiar to you? Like other stories in Scripture? Just like it reminded me of some contemporary stories, it also reminded me of Biblical stories. The presence of the high priest in Stephen’s story reminds me of the high priest Caiphas in Jesus’ trial. The crowd rushing to stone Stephen echoes the woman caught in adultery in John 8. The laying of cloaks at the feet of Saul reminds me of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Stephen’s words of “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” reminiscent of Jesus’ “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”² Skinner once again gets to the heart of the matter – “Fortunately, Acts, through its many connections to the Gospel of Luke, keeps our attention of Jesus’ example.

Not a high-octane Messiah but one willing to risk vulnerability, this Savior knows these dynamics of aggression and coercion up close, having suffered from them himself. Because of this, or perhaps despite it, he nevertheless remains committed to delivering us from our worst proclivities – even from our very violent selves.”³

Necks and teeth, hearts and ears. All in the upper part of our body. All integral to controlling our central nervous system. The system that is responsible for receiving, processing, and responding to sensory information.

How would the story of Stephen have been different if the people calmed their central nervous systems before acting? If when they felt his words cut their hearts, they had taken a deep breath, relaxed their jaws, adjusted their posture, and tuned their ears to the truth of what they heard and not the fear that it invoked? If they had calmed their central nervous systems, before using their feet and legs to rush toward him and before bending their backs and reaching their hands and arms to grab stones, and throw them at another human being, how could the story have been different?

Discord is a part of what it means to be a human being living on this earth. We are diverse. We are opinionated. We have different gifts, talents, and abilities. We approach scenarios from different angles. We are passionate about the causes for which we care. This is normal. But we cannot let the discord become a permanent

¹ Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, 47

² Luke 23:34

³ Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, 49

state of being. Because that's when violence can bubble up and take over. That's when it can hurt others, ultimately hurting all of us.

Last Wednesday I got to sit on my friend Susie's porch in Montreat during a rainstorm. Susie is the person I work most closely with when planning for our youth to attend the Montreat Youth Conference. Susie is finishing up her seminary degree with a part-time congregational internship while still working at Montreat. So, we were reflecting about the vocation of pastoring and the job of preaching. We were talking about the challenge of pastoring a church with a wide spectrum of beliefs and opinions. Of how that's the best kind of church to pastor, but that it is also hard. It requires patience and openness, the willingness to listen and love, and, of utmost importance, being grounded in Christ. And I was telling her about this sermon. We began to talk about what it means to be people of non-violence in a world that is so violent. And Susie began to talk about the long-time US Representative, John Lewis, who was a major part of the Civil Rights movement in our country and died in 2020. Representative Lewis was her husband's dear friend, and he was the Best Man in their wedding. Susie once asked him how he was able to be non-violent in the face of violence. How he could endure the beatings he received and not be tempted to return violence with violence. "That's simple," he replied, "I would close my eyes and pray to God to see the spark of the Holy Spirit in the person beating me. I would pray to see them as a little child, a baby, created in the divine image of God." Lewis wouldn't try to control others or God. Instead, he would control his own nervous system, relaxing his body so the blows wouldn't hit tensed muscles, protecting his neck so that it would not become stiff, keeping his ears open so that he wouldn't become deaf to the voice of the other, breathing deep the mercies of God, and opening his heart to love those who only wanted to hurt him.

Tyler Childer's song, Long Violent History, ends with these words –

*Oh, would that be the start of a long violent history
Of tuckin' our tails as we try to abide*

We cannot control our brothers and sisters with violence. We cannot control God with violence. But sometimes the discord is too much, and we're tempted to try. In those moments, tune in. Don't look away. Don't cover your ears. Or tuck your tails, trying to abide. Instead, take a deep breath, relax your jaw, adjust your posture and

listen. Be cut to the heart. And let the Holy Spirit fill, guide, and change you. Amen and amen.

