

Thomas R. Cook

St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota

10:00 a.m. Celebration of Holy Eucharist

The Feast of St. Stephen; Sunday, December 30, 2018 (*transferred from December 26*)

“St. Stephen... the Martyr”

Scripture: Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51c-60; Propers for St. Stephen (for better understanding read all of Acts chapters 6 and 7)

Note: In accordance with the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, I am transferring the observance of the Feast of St. Stephen, patron of our local faith community, in place of the ordinary First Sunday after Christmas Day.

Good morning. And Merry Christmas! On this first Sunday after Christmas Day, I am taking the option provided in The Book of Common Prayer to celebrate St. Stephen, our faith community's patron and namesake, ordinarily observed in the western church on December 26th. The last time we did this together was Christmas 2015, so it seems fitting to return again to this remembrance and appreciation. Stephen still has much to teach us on our own day.

So, what does it mean that we are members of “St. Stephen's Church?” As though by being a part of this community of faith we belong somehow to Stephen, this long-deceased sort-of hero of the Christian faith. And more precisely, what does it mean to be members of “St. Stephen the Martyr?” for that is our formal congregational name... the Church of St. Stephen the Martyr. That word “martyr” conjures up a lot of ideas for many people, and, I bet, mostly ideas of grisly death, for the church has long held that martyrs are those who die for the sake of their faith in Christ, and preachers all over the world will remember Stephen for the death he

died... beaten with stones at the hands of his own people as he tried to convince them that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah of God. So, Stephen is a saint, because he was killed for Christ? The *proto-martyr*, the first martyr who died for his faith in Jesus.

But I don't think that's what makes Stephen a martyr entirely. Personally, I believe Stephen is a martyr, because *he lived for his faith in Jesus*. And nothing, not even death, would separate him from that faith and that love. Because before the first stone of his execution ever struck Stephen's body, he became a martyr for the living choices he made, for the willingness with which he served in Jesus' name, and for the way he chose to love and care for other people. So it's Stephen's life that makes all the difference to me. So what did he do to become a martyr?...

First, Stephen was willing to be a servant. The 6th chapter of Acts tells us that Stephen was chosen as one of seven people to be servants in the Christian faith... literally, ministers ordained by prayer and the touch of the Apostles to provide for the needs of the widows and orphans and needy people among those earliest Christians who were not being fed and cared for by the infant church. It was Stephen's first job to see to it that all who were in need were noticed, fed, clothed, and loved. Acts 6 literally says that the twelve Apostles concurred that "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables." But Stephen was willing to "...

wait at tables.” And I’ve wondered if the Apostles might have missed the boat a little in feeling that “waiting on tables” was somehow a neglect of the word of God. Nevertheless, with Stephen and the other six ordained to this ministry, the Order of Deacons was born in the Church. And to this day thousands of years later, deacons ceremonially serve at the altar in Holy Communion without leading the Eucharistic prayers, as the priests and bishops do. And deacons are called especially to care for the poor and neglected, the hungry and sick and dispossessed people of this world. And while some choose to serve as deacons for life, all priests and bishops of our contemporary Episcopal Church are first ordained as deacons to the service of God and the people. Amelia Arthur serves with us as deacon now while she prepares for her ordination as priest next year because of the ministry of St. Stephen.

But while Stephen served at tables as a means of serving his Lord, he didn’t do so quietly. The book of Acts tells us that Stephen was known for “great wonders and signs” among the people. He was a preacher. He drew attention to Christian faith, and he told any he could tell about Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the world. And that got him into hot water. But this is the second thing for me that makes Stephen a martyr: He spoke the truth of Jesus Christ as he understood it, to anyone, anytime. And this serves as both a model for us and as a cautionary tale in our own time... for though Stephen spoke only what he held to be true, it seems to be a

perpetual part of our human habits that the truth as another sees it is not always a welcome word, even when it is indeed the truth. And Stephen called out the leaders of his Jewish community, and he held many of them accountable for Jesus' death, and he told them so, and they could not bear such a harsh rebuke, and in their anger, and perhaps in their denial, they silenced Stephen rather than listening to him.

Which leads to the third thing for which I believe Stephen is a martyr... he chose the way of forgiveness. I fully expect that Stephen was aware of the stories passed through the small community of the earliest church, remembered and told by others, that Jesus, on the cross with little life in him, chose to ask that God forgive those who were taking his life, for they did not understand all they were doing. In that moment of grace, Jesus opened the door to our forgiveness, healing, and salvation from our own sins. So, it is no surprise to me that Stephen, in his final moments of life, asked forgiveness for those who were taking his life, and in doing so, he again spoke truth and grace about the Lord he loved and served.

So, I'm a pretty big fan of the martyrs, but perhaps not first for their death, rather for their lives. After all, "martyr" is a word translated to mean "witness", in our case, witnesses to the love of God revealed in Jesus. Stephen was a martyr for Christ, a witness for Christ, long before his death. So I would honor him first for his living,

for his servanthood in Jesus name... and for his speaking truth to power, telling people of Jesus the Savior, even at the risk of his own life... and I would honor Stephen's martyrdom because of his choice to love and forgive others, even those who took his life, not because Stephen is a hero, but because he honestly and humbly patterned his life after his Lord... and ours. And I do not mean to deny the importance of Stephen's death in his witness for Jesus, for he made his witness even with his last breath. I understand why the Church remembers such women and men. But a grisly death is only that — a grisly death— without the witness of the faithful life, no matter how long or how short a time one has to live that faithful life.

So what does it mean to be members of the Church of St. Stephen the Martyr? Well, at the least, it means that we live in the memory of one who was a servant to the needy, one who was a speaker of the truth no matter the cost, and one whose love for others called him to forgive those who would harm him. At least we live in this memory. But what the world really needs is martyrs, witnesses to the Way of Jesus Christ who live and act like Stephen... today. While we are together, love one another, find ways to be of service, share aloud your hope in Jesus, and learn to forgive. And take that life and faith out into the world so in need of that humble service and faithful witness. In this way, we are members of St. Stephen's Church.