

Living Witnesses
Acts 7; 1 Peter 2
May 22, 2011

Last Sunday we read in Acts how the early church prospered. Great signs and wonders were performed and the church grew by leaps and bounds. Our lessons today from Acts and First Peter show that the early church had its problems, too. They tell how being a Christian may not always be easy or comfortable or without serious conflicts of interest or confusions about loyalty. Stephen was stoned to death for his faith. He was the first Christian martyr, dying in a way that imitated his Lord's. Stephen had preached a sermon that prompted a violent reaction and he was killed for his message, judged to be blasphemy, and as he died he echoed the words of Jesus from the cross, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The blood of the martyrs, said early churchman Tertullian, was seed for the church. The martyrs suffered and died, yes, but their demise made the young church grow.

This story of martyrdom and many that followed have given encouragement and inspiration to Christians over the centuries who have themselves suffered because of their faith. In the first three centuries after Jesus, Christianity was off and on illegal and its followers were punished or executed by the Romans. Some of our first ancestors in the faith joined the gladiators and the wild animals as entertainment for the so-called games. One of the most famous early martyrs, after Stephen, was a bishop who was sent to the lions under Marcus Aurelius in the mid second century. Officials pleaded with Bishop Polycarp to renounced Jesus, burn a little incense, and proclaim Caesar as Lord, so that they could release him, a beloved and kindly old bishop. According to the historian Eusebius, Polycarp said instead, "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Other early martyrs simply affirmed, "I am a Christian," and that was enough to have them sent to the games, or beheaded, crucified or in some other tortuous way executed.

Our word martyr needs a bit of unpacking. We use it casually to refer to the sacrificial individual, sometimes a mom, who wants to make sure we notice and appreciate how dear her sacrifice is. The martyr is, thus, drawing attention to him or herself and is quite the opposite of the selfless sacrificial lamb who goes to slaughter innocent and without regard for its own status or life. But the root of the word martyr reminds us of the origins of the idea of martyrdom. It is not just about sacrifice and dying. The English word comes from the Greek word for witness. The first witnesses of our faith often suffered as a result. They were imprisoned, tortured and if they would not publicly say that they were giving up their faith in Jesus, killed. The hymn, "Faith of our Fathers

living still, in spite of dungeon, fire and sword,” sings of the “in spite of” part of faith, the heroic example of those whose witness costs them their safety or possibly their life. But of course we are not all heroes, and we are fortunate to live in a culture that doesn’t cause us to go to jail or the gallows for saying we believe in Jesus as Lord.

So, let’s focus a bit on the other aspect of that word martyr or witness. The important thing about Stephen is not that he died for his faith, but that his living witness to the faith was so very powerful and effective. Before we get to chapter seven in Acts we read how Stephen, “full of grace and power, did great signs and wonders among the people.” (6:8) The church grew from the seed blood of this martyr in life and in death. One of the dimensions we have overemphasized in our faith is dying and what comes after. Atheists often point to the belief in judgment and afterlife as the key stumbling block to faith in God. I think that’s a problem because judgment and afterlife are not the key “core principles” of Jesus’ teaching and his life, death and resurrection. The kingdom of God was the core of his teaching and that has far more to do with the blood of living than dying.

I recommend the April 25 issue of *Time* magazine and its cover story, “What if there’s no hell?” The article, “Is Hell Dead?” mostly reviews the book *Love Wins* and the popularity and controversy of its author, Michigan pastor Rob Bell. (Bell’s megachurch known as Mars Hill regularly attracts 100 times the number of our worshipers each Sunday; yes, instead of 70, they have 7,000! That’s what makes it a megachurch, where worship averages more than a few thousand each Sunday.) The article describes an artshow at Mars Hill about the search for peace in a broken world. An artist in the show had included a quote from Mohandas Gandhi, and a visitor to the exhibit had stuck a note by the quotation that said, “Reality check: He’s in hell.” Rob Bell was struck by this and began his book with this story and his reaction. *Really? Gandhi’s in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letter the rest of us know?* The subtitle of Bell’s book, *Love Wins*, is *A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.

The book has made Bell a black sheep in the evangelical community because he proposes the universalist idea that God in Christ has made hell obsolete. Taking hell away leaves the church without its most powerful sanction, say the critics. This is not new stuff. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached like this early in the last century. Mainline Protestants quit emphasizing death, heaven and hell, generations ago. Bell is only on the cover of *Time* because his tradition finds this kind of thing heretical to this day: “When we get to what happens when we die,” he writes in *Love Wins*, “we don’t have any video footage, so let’s at least be honest that we are speculating, because we are.... At

the center of the Christian tradition since the first church, have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.”

The important thing, the core value, the central doctrine of our faith is reconciling love. That is where the story of Stephen’s martyrdom re-enters the picture here. Luke says that when Jesus died he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” That was Luke’s gospel, chapter 23, the first words from Jesus’ mouth, after they had nailed him to the cross. Luke then comes along with his second volume, his Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and tells the Stephen story, martyred by stoning, in chapter 7. Stephen echoes the words of Jesus and asks God to forgive his executioners. Is the key here the death of this witness/martyr, or is it not the act of forgiveness?

The Catholic and Orthodox tradition of remembering martyrs and saints does try to lift up the life as well as the death of those worth remembering over the long span of Christian history. We don’t pay much attention to saints and martyrs in our tradition, but we can glance at some recent examples to see that the life of the witness is the only thing that makes the death of the martyr worth recalling. Martin Luther King, Jr. said and did prophetic things for fifteen years before an assassin shot him on the balcony of that Memphis motel in 1968. Salvadoran Bishop Oscar Romero, shot in 1981 as he was celebrating Holy Communion at the cathedral in San Salvador, would be just another tragic death in bloody Central America were it not for his longstanding advocacy for justice for his nation’s poor and standing against his government’s oppression and corruption. When we say the blood of the martyrs is seed for the church, we mean that their lifeblood gave the church life, and that lifeblood was so potent, that it continued to make a difference after their death. It is the reconciling love in the lifeblood of Jesus, whose last words were forgiveness, that makes the cross the ultimate symbol of life rather than death. The death of Jesus on the cross would not have the power it has were it not for the life of Jesus that preceded it. The atoning value of the blood of the lamb – even in the ancient rituals of the Jewish temple-- came from the innocence before the sacrificial death.

Today we end our season of teaching the faith in Sunday School. We thank our witnesses, living martyrs of the faith who give of themselves for the sake of the young people of this congregation. We especially thank our superintendent, Connie Johnson, who has coordinated this ministry for a number of years, at first with Jim Branchford, and then as a solo performance. Her witness, powerful as it has been, has not killed her, and for this we are thankful to God. But all good things in this life do come to an end, and she has asked to be relieved. The Holy Spirit is out there among you right now, brooding and whispering and tickling and elbowing one or more of you to consider taking up this task. It does not need to be a lifetime commitment or sacrificial

deathblow, but we do want at least two years so that we can build up our program of faith formation, not only among our youngest members, but for all ages.

The ministry of faith formation in any church is an ongoing project of lifelong learning. It is a journey without end. We make disciples, not only in Sunday School and confirmation, but for life. Like all living things, when growth stops, dying takes over. The mighty oak that takes several hundred years to grow and decades to die, but the point is that growth and life is what we are about in our Christian witness. Moving forward, making progress as pilgrims, blazing new trails...that is the heart and soul of our faith. Love, in the end, wins, and all will be reconciled to God. That message remains fresh. The news is forever good. Love wins. The more we dig into those soils, the richer the crop, the more bountiful the harvest. Thanks be to God.