

***Easter Worship Series: Acts of the ‘Sent Ones’***  
**“Praying Forgiveness”**

Fifth Sunday of Easter: 18 May 2014  
Confirmation Recognition: Sermon Text: Acts 7:55-60  
FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to  
gain what he cannot lose” (Jim Elliot, 1949).

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Confirmation Sunday is a day when a group of young Christians take a step toward becoming full disciples of Jesus. Today is when we as a church welcome your profession of faith. You are now faith partners. Some of your new equals are 85; others only slightly older than you. Yet you join in the great quest: to live lives as disciples.

Acts tells us about the early church. As the church matured it needed additional leaders besides the apostles. Thus the church chose seven to offer a “daily distribution of food.” Here Acts introduces Stephen, “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (6:5). He “did great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8). Stephen defends himself as the religious authorities bring him to a religious court for blasphemy (7:2-53). His sermon teaches that we can worship God anywhere—not just in the Temple.

[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 (Acts 7:55-60).

Many of the listeners intentionally avoid listening: “they covered their ears” (7:57). Then they stone Stephen. To stone someone, victims either had stones

thrown at them or they were thrown onto stones. “The witnesses” were legally expected to cast the first stones. Stephen’s words (7:59-60) echo Jesus’ words on the cross. He pleads for God to be merciful to his murderers just as Jesus did. He prayed for their forgiveness!

Like Jesus, Stephen’s death is at the hands of those who cannot bear the truth of his prophetic word. Like Jesus, Stephen too asks God to forgive those who will kill him: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Jesus, too, says from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). But questions linger. Was Stephen a courageous prophet who told the people what they needed to hear? Was he heroic? Or rather, was Stephen shortsighted and sacrificed himself in a one shot attempt to shame others into a more righteous life? Was he foolish to enter a ministry lasting only as long as his initial sermon?

These kinds of questions face all who live out the gospel. We call these persons witnesses (*martyrs*). Although we cannot ever fully grasp God’s mysterious design in this sacrificial act of Jesus on the cross, we can accept it as an article of faith. But Stephen’s death is different for his death raises at least as many questions as it answers, especially for us in May of 2014. Today we live in a practical, down-to-earth, pragmatic world. We want to do what works. Certainly idealism has its place, but we are typically interested in results. In our recall, when we hear the phrase, “the principle of the thing” it is often spoken by people with wounded pride—often in anger.

Stephen puts his life on the line in Acts and speaks a prophetic word to those who obviously receive it badly. It takes great courage to speak out in the fashion that Stephen did. I once heard a story about Nikita Khrushchev, former

premier of the former Soviet Union (what is now known as Russia):

**Khrushchev denounced many of Joseph Stalin's policies and atrocities. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, a heckler in the audience interrupted Khrushchev.**

**"You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?"**

**"Who said that?" roared Khrushchev.**

**An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle.**

**Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why" (Today in the Word, July 13, 1993).**

To do a necessary thing took great courage on Stephen's part. Yet, when we consider all the changes needed in our progressive society it seems that leaders either lead with courage and are willing to pay the ultimate price—or they do not lead at all. Names like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lincoln, John and Bobby Kennedy, Anwar Sadat, Thomas More, and others have witnessed by their lives. At least we can say this: we are still speaking about Stephen 2000 years after his witness for a reason. His was an important witness. And not only simply the witness, but also the praying of forgiveness for those who sinned against him!

Whenever you hear a person slander someone you know unfairly, do you have the courage to stand up for the truth? When you hear a joke at the expense of a person of another race, religion, or ethnic group, are you honorable enough to say "no thanks?" Certainly we embrace good humor, but are we brave enough to respect other people even when they are not present? I have a book, *Speeches that Changed the World*. As expected, this book includes speeches by Moses, Socrates, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Thomas Jefferson, Susan B. Anthony, Winston Churchill, and others. Remarkably, the included sixty-eight speeches fail to include Stephen's name in the table of

contents. Yet, if you know the New Testament, then you know that in Stephen's audience that day was perhaps (outside of Jesus) the chief character in Christian history. Do you remember? "The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." And you know the rest of the story. Stephen: hero or fool—you make the call. But one thing we must know is that you never know where or how your witness makes a serious difference in our common life together. One just never knows who might be in the audience of our lives.

How does being foolish play out in life? How does being wise? I knew a young woman who demonstrated both—and in this way is much like many of us here today.

Angela Pippin was a beautiful, articulate, brilliant, and faithful young disciple of Christ. Her grandfather, J. L. Glaze, had been a United Methodist pastor. Angela had everything going for her that a person could want. Yet she missed being valedictorian of her high school graduating class by an infinitesimal, almost microscopic, grade point. As a result she saw herself as a failure. I tried to comfort her by pointing out how many other learners she finished ahead of, but she was devastated. For years she saw her second place finish in class rank as an emblem of dishonor. Only later, after she married and had children, did she let go of that sinking feeling of being in second place. We all have moments of disappointment and loss—all of us.

And yet in my book Angela taught a whole church about the discipline of giving and was an ideal example to many, many people. When Angela Pippin was in the sixth grade and confirmed she made a decision to give a dollar a week to the church and increased that gift by a dollar each year. By the time she graduated from high school about thirty years ago she gave Kingswood



UMC \$364 a year. At the time she was 17 years old and was in the top 15% of the givers to our church in 1985!

How does being foolish play out in life? How does being wise? As you CONFIRMANDS go into the world and make your way, embrace your confession of faith and make a vow to God to make your witness in a way that is meaningful to you and of value to God's Kingdom. Amen.

**David N. Mosser, FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011**