

**Christmas 1 – St. Stephan, Deacon & Martyr – Dec. 26**

**“A Life to Die For”**

**Acts 6: 8 – 7: 2a; 51 - 60**

**I don't know about you but this day gives me kind of a I don't know what to do with it day. Yesterday we were celebrating the birth of Jesus. Today we're celebrating the death of Stephan, often called the first martyr of the Christian church. I think we need to remember that there was one martyr prior to that but you know we can work around that. It is called a minor festival. It is only celebrated in a year in which the day, December 26<sup>th</sup>, falls**

**on a Sunday. The rubrics, the rules by which we conduct worship say that when there is a special day it takes precedence over the more Common Day which would be Christmas 1. You can tell that's pretty common because all it's called is Christmas 1 to be followed by the next week by Christmas 2. They needed two weeks to fill in before we get to Epiphany. What can I tell you?**

**You might remember or you can go look at the first seven chapters of Act that a problem arose in the church. The church was now a multinational church. There were both Greek and Hebrew worshipers in it. The church was also**

**taking care of widows, those were the women who had no one else to take care of them, no sons no grandsons. Each day the widows would receive an allotment of food. Well the Greek widows felt that they were being treated less generously than the Hebrew widows.**

**It wouldn't really surprise me. The church is mostly made up of Hebrews right at this point who have become followers of Jesus. It's pretty natural to discriminate against those who are less common than those who are the common recipients. The complaint went to the disciples. People thought they should be the ones taking care of the**

**distribution of food so that the widows each got a fair share. The disciples rightly said that their job was not to wait on tables and neglect the ministry of the word of God.**

**So they said that seven men who are full of the Spirit and wisdom should be selected by the church to carry out this distribution. Among them was a young man named Stephan. So just so we get this straight, Stephan's job to give out food to widows. As you heard in our second lesson he never did that. There is no record of Stephan helping to distribute food to the widows. There is rather a very short record of Stephan being a powerful witness for Jesus in the**

**Jewish community. He is so powerful that he gets in trouble.**

**So the Jewish leaders do what they're pretty good with, they come up with some false witnesses to accuse Stephan of being against the Holy Place and against the law. That will get him in trouble with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They'll have something to come together about. When you're against the old stuff, you're going to be in trouble with the powerful because the old stuff got the powerful to where they are.**

**What really got Stephan in trouble was his bold witness to the Jews. We don't hear it in our lesson for today. I'd like to suggest that when you leave here today you go back and read all of Acts 7. In it, Stephan presents a very logical and beginning to end witness of the disobedience of God's people which has gotten them into the trouble they're in. The accusation that's been made against Stephan is that he's preaching some new type of religion. So he goes back. He starts at the very beginning with Abraham and walks through all of the history of the people of Israel to show one thing that Jesus is part of this. He's the fulfillment of the very promise given to Abraham thousands of years**

**before. This is not some apparition but rather it is the continuation of God's story and the fulfillment of His promise. In essence what gives Stephan trouble is the fact that he's telling the truth and they don't want to hear it. By the way he's not beating up on them he's telling them the wonderful history of how God and this people have been together but he also confronts them with the fact that they have not listened to God and because of that they killed Jesus. And when he gets to that point they don't want to hear any more.**

**Stephan, the first martyr is an illustration of this truth. A life worth living is a life rooted in the past. He follows in the long line of prophets who sought to bring Israel back to God. They suffered the same fate as Stephan did, they were killed by those in authority who did not want to hear where they had gone astray.**

**For all the centuries in which Christianity has existed there have been men and women who have clung to the truth of God's work and witnessed for Him even when they knew it would be unpopular. Over the centuries many of them have given their lives, they have allowed themselves to die**



**for Jesus in order to live for God. They never shied away from the truth that God was working beforehand but they were also there to confront those who failed to live in God's word.**

**There are big names that we can tick off of people who have given their lives for Jesus but I think we need to also understand they are a witness to each one of us and an encouragement to live our lives in a worthy way. The church never exists in a void. It is joined to all those who have gone before but we're not stuck in the past. Yes we sing songs that are a couple hundred year old, why do we**

**do that? To join ourselves with the witness of the church throughout the ages. We use a special space, different music, a liturgy that is grounded in history and we eat a meal that is grounded in a meal that Jesus Himself ate almost 2,000 years ago because it is rooted in the faith and in the fruition of the faith.**

**These things are not meant to be anachronisms, keeping us bound to that past but rather they are the joined wisdom of centuries of life in Christ that enable us to be a witnesses to people in a time when life is changing so fast that we are at risk of losing anything that anchors us to faith and God.**

**Our faith is deeply rooted in a long tradition, reaching back 2,000 years to Jesus Christ and in fact goes back even before Jesus. It leads us to a faith that is grounded. One of our hymns we sing “how firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord is laid for your faith in His excellent Word.” Lives worth living and the people whom we remember as living that faith both those who died martyrs and those who died in the faith have built that firm foundation for us to stand on as we go out into the next part of life.**

**Even as we are rooted in the past, lives worth living keep an eye on the future. We are not like a plant that has**

**outgrown its pot and becomes root bound. When you see that you see the new sprouts are trying to make their way out of the little watering holes at the bottom of the pot because they want new life. So we find ourselves singing hymns that are also very contemporary, adapting acts of worship that are rooted in the past to function in the present.**

**We take steps of faith like venturing outside our walls to help build a house with Habitat to be the blessing God intends us to be in this community. We don't want to become bound in this building, expecting the world to come**

**to us. Our plan is that we're going out. We hope it's just the first big step in that going out. Even as we take that step we are reserving some funds from the Go! Campaign for the next pastor to also find a way to move us out into the community where we can meet people, get to know them and get an opportunity to share our faith with them.**

**Have you ever heard the seven last words of the church? More importantly have you ever spoken the seven last words of the church? "We've never done it that way before!" We just broke that rule because we don't want those to be the last words of our church. It is only as we**

**move out into the community that we get that opportunity to share that faith with more people. A life worth living is rooted in the past, but just as Stephan did, it gazes towards heaven. It has its eye on the future, looking for the Glory of God. We honor Stephan as a symbol, a symbol of all those who have looked beyond the suffering of the present and the moment of death to catch a glimpse of the Glory of God. Rooted, but not root-bound ... living for the future.**

**Stephan learned that a life worth living, a life to die for, is a life of giving. As I said we don't hear his call to ministry. To serve widows. Although there is no scriptural reference**

**about it I'm sure that Stephan did exactly that. He heard God's call and he responded to it. His was a life of service, a ministry of food, caring for widows, giving of himself. And ultimately that giving of himself led him to give his very own life.**

**When we look at ourselves in the mirror, when we take a deep look at our lives and the lives of people who have inspired us, we find that a life worth living is not found in how much we get, but it is measured by what we give. A life worth living is the life of giving.**

**There are some who suggest that the church's only interest is in money. The more it can grab, the more it can have. It suggests that the success of the church is based on prosperity. And it has become known as the gospel of prosperity. We hear it often from pastor's on the airwaves, who inform us that if we give to them, God will reward us tenfold or twenty fold or hundred fold and that will be the sign that we are Christians. Don't fall for it. God does not measure us by the amount of money in our bank. God is not looking for us to become wealth. That's a false idol. Don't measure your self-worth by your net-worth.**



**Rather, measure your wealth by the relationships that God has given you. That you are rich in fellowship and friendship. Think about that as you come to the table today. You are joined not just with the few people who are in this room this morning. You are joined to the whole church through all time and through all space. As you receive that bread, the Body of Christ, and drink the wine, the blood of Christ, the distance between heaven and earth thins out, the great divide grows porous and we sit down to supper together. And we remember those wonderful words from the hymn “For All The Saints” “Oh blessed communion, fellowship divine we feebly struggle, they in**

**glory shine. Yet, all are one in thee, for all are thine  
Alleluia, Alleluia.” Thanks be to God.**