

<Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; John 14:1-14>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

When I was taking theater classes in middle and high school, I was always eager to prepare for the show. The majority of the time I was engaged in back stage and technical production - set design, sound, lighting. Acting - being front and center with a memorized script - was never quite my area of enjoyment. Regardless, I loved being part of the production, playing my own unique part, even if it was unseen and unspoken. Even though my role was less of an acting part, however, I still had to go through the acting exercises with my friends.

One such exercise was that of mirroring. In this exercise, you and a partner stood face-to-face, and while one of you was the leader, the other needed to mirror whatever movement, whatever action, whatever facial expression the leader made; as if you were their reflection in a mirror.

This exercise was always a challenge to me; I'm not sure I can say why, but I just never felt that I could mirror my partner accurately, or make my movements smooth and natural; I always felt like I was realizing after-the-fact how they were moving, and then rushing to catch up. I probably wasn't as bad at this as I felt, but that's how I viewed myself: always half a step behind, trying to understand what my partner was going to do next. Little did I know then that such an exercise, and more so the perspective and mentality behind it, would be so integral to the life of faith.

As we read through The Book of Acts in the Easter season, we are brought to story after story, encounter after encounter, in which the apostles and first believers of the early church attempt to mirror Jesus' actions, to live in the example that he set for them through his life and teachings, his ministry and guidance. To read The Book of Acts in comprehensive and cohesive sections, and not just in a smattering of disconnected verses each week, we see how much the apostles are attempting to mirror Jesus' example: their sermons proclaim the Kingdom of God as it has come near in the person (and resurrection) of Jesus; their prayers reflect gratitude for the life of faith they have received; their actions and ministries mirror the care and compassion, notably for the least of the world, which Jesus had likewise emphasized. And while we see great faith in these efforts, we now see, as well, that they were not always received with an open spirit by everyone.

Particularly the religious leaders. Yet again, they are not happy. To look only at the brief verses of this morning's reading in Acts 7, we would know very little of the overall story, save that one of the apostles, Stephen, is being stoned. But to understand better we need to go back to the previous chapter and read it together with all of Chapter 7 (which I encourage all of you to do).

But to sum up: Stephen is one of the first Deacons of the church, charged along with others to oversee the distribution of food and the feeding of widows. He does this well, and performs other signs and wonders in Jesus' name, and speaks passionately and eloquently about Jesus and the gospel, proclaiming the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. All of this he does in Jesus' example, and does it well, and does it faithfully.

And sometimes, when we do things well in the example of the one who leads us, we end up following in the example of his suffering, as well. You see, some of the religious leaders are upset that they cannot debate as well with Stephen, nor counter his faithful arguments, so they begin to lay false charges of blasphemy at his feet. This leads to a baseless arrest, which leads to Stephen testifying on his own behalf and bearing witness to the good news of God's Kingdom, for all people. And all of that brings us to our reading this morning, wherein these religious leaders now immediately and without calling any other witnesses, determine from a place of frustration to have Stephen killed.

If it sounds eerily familiar to Jesus' own passion and death, that's because it is. Just as Stephen lives in Jesus' example of proclaiming the good news of the gospel, just as he ministers in the example of providing food and hope for the poor, the marginalized, and the needy, he ends up becoming the first martyr of the early church.

But Stephen did not suffer this from a place of fear or anxiety. He did not follow from a place of comfort or self-serving. He followed as one who had received strength in faith and hope in the promise of life which Jesus offers. He followed from the reminder that this, from the very beginning, might very well be the way.

Jesus, ahead of his betrayal, arrest, and passion, reminds the disciples that they now know the way. We often get fixated on the place which the way leads to and try to determine the nature and the bounds of "the father's house." But Jesus speaks more so about the way, the path to follow, which leads us to join him where he is. In the Greek, the place is assumed; it does not receive direct attention. Jesus is offering the disciples, and us as well, the reminder, the reassurance that we now know the way, and that we are able to follow it, and in so doing, to join him in ministry and in life, in faith and in the Kingdom. All we have to do is follow, to mirror.

For Stephen, and then for others of the apostles, following in this manner ultimately meant sharing with Jesus in his death. But as we are reminded, our following "does not mean that all Christians are called to literally die for their faith or should seek to suffer as a mark of discipleship. Rather, the text identifies the reality that proclaiming the gospel in word and deed often meets with opposition in a world whose values do not always align with the self-giving love of Jesus" (Working Preacher). Living in the example of the one who brings us to faith and to life will mean that we choose that example always over the example of the world.

How do we likewise follow the example of Christ's love set before us, proclaiming and living out the imminent and impending reality of God's Kingdom, a Kingdom of welcome and acceptance, a Kingdom of justice and righteousness, a Kingdom in which all are fed

and nurtured and invited to draw closer to Christ? How do we mirror this example in our daily lives? Jesus prepared the disciples to continue in his example after he would be taken from them, giving them the way to follow and proclaim the gospel, and we continue in that example today. It is different for each of us, and communal for many of us, but it is indeed a manner of faithfully following in Jesus' example.

We do this as we come together to package 10,000 meals worth of food for people who are hungry and living in food-insecure areas. We do this in collecting baby supplies and educational supplies for those who desire to live into the fullness of life themselves, and by building beds for those who would otherwise be sleeping on the floor. We do this by offering our time and our energy, and we do this by offering our support and finances for similar ministries to do their work. We do this every time we agree to serve on a committee or a board, or to volunteer in the Food Pantry, or to teach a Sunday School class. We follow in Jesus' example as we do all this and more, and as we come again to the Table which he has prepared for us, finding nourishment and renewal, being led in the way of God's Kingdom by the Spirit. All of this and more is how we live out the example we have received.

I may not have enjoyed or appreciated the mirroring exercise of my theater classes, feeling that I could never quite get the hang of it in reflecting the movements of my partner. But in the grace and love of Christ, led by the Spirit of God, we are able to live and move and minister in the example set by Jesus in faith. We are able to both receive and offer anew the fullness of life in the Kingdom of God, which is breaking in to our world again and again and again. This is who we are; this is how we live; this is our faith made real. The example has been set for us, and our calling is to follow, and to live into it, proclaiming God's good news for all the world, in every time and place. Let us live by Jesus' example. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*