

## **Acts 7:55–60**

*55But 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!’ 57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58Then 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. 59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 60Then 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.*

Living God, with joy we celebrate the presence of your risen Word. Enliven our hearts by your Holy Spirit so that we may proclaim the good news of eternal and abundant life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For the last couple of weeks, we’ve seen the positive response to a sermon. Namely, Peter’s first sermon to the people in Jerusalem. The sermon that increased the church from 120 to 3,000 people. This week we see what a bad response to a sermon looks like. I guess unsuccessful preachers should take solace that in today’s world they can get complaints about a sermon, people may leave the church about a sermon, they can even get fired for a bad sermon, but most likely they won’t get killed or stoned for preaching a bad sermon.

This story about Stephen is a hard one to preach about these days. Lately, the idea of martyrdom has fallen under a bit of a cloud. What do you think of when you hear about martyrs? In my experience, a martyr is either reduced to a psychological complex foisted off on someone who does too much for others, or it's someone with a vest lined with explosives ready to doom themselves and plenty of others for the sake of a cause, and the cash benefits paid to the family, after the fact. There's no question about it. The stock on martyrdom is way, way down these days. These images have kind of hijacked the word martyr. The word martyr is a transliteration of a Greek word that means “witness.” So, to be a martyr is actually to bear witness. So, the question for us is, as Christians, what kind of witness for Christ are we supposed to be? I think we can all agree that there are good ways to be witnesses and there are some not so good ways to witness.

Would you be willing to die for the cause of Jesus Christ? Of course, if we are true to our faith, we would not be willing to cause other people’s deaths when we made our sacrifice. It would be just us, Just us for the witness to the faith. Would you be willing?

This is a fascinating and difficult question. We know that at least some people, like those in the military, are willing to give and to take life for a cause. This has been true since the beginning of human history. No judgment implied here, but that isn't the same as being a martyr.

In fact, I would say that the prospect of martyrdom is not illuminated by a question that asks if you'd be willing to die for the cause. My own viewpoint is that the question should be, "Are you willing to live your beliefs without compromise no matter what the cost?" Now there's a question worth considering.

How deeply are we committed to our Christian faith? How far are we willing to go, not in risking our lives, though that may be the outcome, but rather in living the life of faith fully and completely? This kind of commitment is not the path of zealotry. Zealots have a single, laser focus and seldom know much about listening, learning, or growing. Their minds are made up, their paths are set, and the goal is unshakable.

While some might say these things about committed faith in Christ, it is perhaps wise to look beyond the perils of zealotry and into the folds of a life lived well and fully in Christ Jesus. Again, the question comes. What would such a life look like?

It would seem that a committed Christian life begins and ends with the one unshakable truth of our faith, and that is "self-giving love is redemptive." Let me say that again. The core of our faith, the rock upon which our lives are built in Christ, is the sacred truth "self-giving love is redemptive." This truth bursts into our consciousness as Christians when we see the self-giving act of God in Christ for us on the cross. We see it, too, in the teachings and stories of Jesus in scripture. We also witness it in the lives of the saints down the centuries. I want to emphasize this point as well; we are not doing these acts of love in hopes of redemption. This is not about making sure we are "good enough" to get into heaven. We do these things because we know that we are not good enough to earn our way into heaven, yet through the grace of God we have faith that we will get there anyway. We love because we feel the love of God and can't help but show it to others.

From Saint Francis to Dorothy Day to Martin Luther King Jr. and beyond, we see that the ultimate love we give is the gift of love that is imbued with the self. When someone loves from the inside out, with their souls, that love has impact. When we give of ourselves in love, that act has transformative power. Whether, like Mother Teresa, it is a life given in service to the poor, or someone like you or me who strives to live a life that is oriented toward self-giving, the impact of such love changes people. It has, as I said, redemptive power.

Now, as we talk about living, rather than dying, for our faith, let me be clear. Full and faithful living may well lead us to the cross and death. Faithfulness in life often does have a price. Whether it's honesty at the job that may cost us, clarity in caring for marginalized people, or standing in faith for unpopular causes, our living for God can lead us with Jesus to Calvary. The point, again, is the living. As Martin Luther King Jr. said on the night before his murder, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will, and he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Only hours after sharing these words, Reverend King was murdered on the balcony outside his hotel room. You see, Reverend King loved life. He didn't want to die. But doing God's will and living the example of self-giving love was what was important to him, even more important than "longevity."

In this age of selfishness and out-of-control world affairs, we must construct a new vision of what it means to go all the way for our faith. In a time where the concept of self-giving love is viewed as unhealthy and weird by society, we step with clarity into lives of self-giving love. In a day when the notion of martyrdom snaps our attention to the evening news to see the shattered lives of a sacrifice that can bring only more death, we must build a living consensus that speaks to the power of a living faith.

A current example of this is wearing a mask in public. A mask may not protect me from getting the virus, but if I have the virus, and I am asymptomatic, it will reduce the chances of spreading it. It's not about my fear of catching the virus, I wear a mask to stop others from getting it. I am willing to give up my "freedom" to not wear a mask, to show love for others that I may encounter.

Together, in Christian community, we are called to go deeper in commitment and to dedicate our lives anew, not to merely die for the cause, but to live for it. We are called into transformational living that offers the gift of love and healing to anyone we encounter, no matter who they are or where they come from.

As our world spins seemingly out of control, we have answers that emerge from lives rooted in the self-giving love of Jesus. As social fabric frays and extremism rears its contorted countenance, we have the clarity and beauty of what it means to live a life of balance and wonder in the folds of God's unfailing grace.

And yes, it does begin and end with love. Then, knowing of the resurrection, we claim that it begins once again! Born in a stable, raised in exile, executed like a common criminal, and back again on the third day! It all moves around the unmovable axis of God's unfailing love for us and for the world God created.

So where do we begin? How might each one of us step more fully and abundantly into a life dedicated to self-giving love? What healing might we offer? What hope might we engender? What might we participate in bringing forth? Think about our relationships. Our families, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances; where among this collection of people might we offer God's incredible self-giving love?

Think for a moment about our church community. Are there ways that we, as Christian community, might live more fully into the abundance of God's love? Are there ways we could quit worrying and, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, "just do God's will"? What would our church community look like if we pooled all our efforts into being a community that focused all our energies on living for our faith?

In raising up this possibility, in lifting up this hope, let us make the confession together that we are and have been little more than part-time Christians. Let us lay out the truth that too often our faith ranks about as high in our lives as our commitment to our involvement in other social endeavors. Let's just be real with one another about taking this faith life and living it fully.

My own suspicion is that this is what got Stephen into trouble. Sure, he was a bit of a hothead who might have spoken the truth a little too directly for his final audience. It's likely that they couldn't get him to keep quiet about this Jesus thing he had found. My guess is he was a bit "over the top" at times, but my own sense of things tells me that for him, his faith was utterly central to his life.

This, my friends, is what it all comes down to in the end. Whether we are Stephen in scripture or just a regular garden-variety Christian trying to get it right, the ultimate and real call to us is to invest our lives fully and completely in the unshakable core belief that self-giving love has redemptive value. Moreover, we make this move, this investment if you will, as recipients of that love in Jesus Christ. We rise together to offer that same love to the world in beauty, wonder, and hope. Amen.