



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Getting Stoned for Jesus

Text: Acts 7:51-60

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As I was getting ready to write this sermon I was thrilled at my sermon title. It is, after all, a play on words, something I have been known to do once or twice. I was dazzled, for a bit, about my cleverness with the sermon title but something was bugging me. I realized that I had preached on this same text in April of 2005 and used the same title. So much for originality.

That sermon is actually on the St. Marks website, but if you compare it to the one today you'll note that the two sermons are totally different from each other.

At face value, the story of the stoning of Stephen seems like a pretty straight forward narrative. In my mind, it brings together three rather random strands that connect only by the fact that they are all part of the same story.

The first strand is about Stephen and the real meaning of sacrifice. Stephen, quite plainly, sacrifices his life for his faith in Jesus. His sacrifice is complete and total; he loses his life, brutally, for the sake of the Gospel.

Within contemporary Christianity we seem to have lost a sense of what the word *sacrifice* really means.

I've heard people speak about tithing and the *blessings* they receive from tithing. This is all well and good. I'm skeptical, however, over how this is presented.

"I started tithing and I won the lottery."

"I started tithing and my electric bill went down."

"I started tithing and got a raise."

It gives the impression that tithing brings about great financial gain and suggests nothing about sacrifice. And we need to be conscious of the fact that God's view of blessings and our's might not be always the same. "Blessed are the poor in spirit----or in Luke more bluntly, blessed are the

poor.” “Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.” Stephen’s sacrifice is not about winning the lottery.

Often we hedge ourselves a bit on this because concepts like sacrifice and generosity aren’t necessarily popular concepts in Christianity. My fear of modern day Christianity is that we modify things to become more attractive to the culture.

In the 16th century missionaries went to Japan in order to convert the Japanese to Christianity. Japan was a difficult mission field for Christianity because it is overwhelming Buddhist and almost everyone practices Shinto rituals----religious rituals which honor and revere ancestors as being divine. Buddhism in Japan is always different from Buddhism elsewhere because of the Shinto influence.

Christianity had a difficult time making progress and eventually all the missionaries were thrown out. The Japanese Christians, however, wanted to live out their faith, so they hid their Christian practices in the midst of Buddhist and Shinto practices. They became known as Crypto-Christians or the Kakure. The Kakure practiced their faith as Christians, but did it in a way that others could not tell what they were doing. They hid their Christianity in their culture.

Centuries later when Christian missionaries were allowed back into Japan they encountered the Kakure Christians and found something out. In their efforts to adapt Christianity to their culture, they lost Christianity. Over time the Crypto-Christians confused their Christian beliefs and their Japanese disguises. The result was the emergence of a hybrid religion no longer resembling the Christianity of the missionaries.

I sometimes fear, in our day and age, when we try to adapt Christianity to our culture, and try to steer away from concepts such as sacrifice and generosity, true pillars of the Gospel, that we do the same. Stephen reminds us, with his death, of the real meaning of sacrifice.

The second almost random strand of this story is about Stephen and the crowd and what is going on.

The God of Stephen and the God of the crowd are the same God. Stephen is angry because he is preaching about the love of Jesus, the Messiah, and the crowd is rejecting what Stephen is saying.

Stephen, however, calls the Jewish leadership to task. It is not because they have a different God, but Stephen believes that Jesus was God’s Son and the Messiah and he is angry at the leadership of Judaism for rejecting Jesus. Previous to this passage Stephen does something of a history lesson describing how generation after generation has rejected everything and everyone God has sent.

So Stephen dies, ultimately, for God.

But as troubling as this is, that isn't the real troubling part. The people in the crowd kill him to maintain their perception of God. They kill him to maintain their **perception** of God.

Sometimes people behave badly and blame it on God. Sometimes people do grievous and sinful things and blame it on God. They do dreadful things, treat other people horribly, and claim that they are doing this 'in God's name.'

Sometimes people see some good that may come from such things and claim that all of this was 'God's will.' It's not.

In Christian ethics there is a principle that God does not will evil even if good ultimately comes from it. Good sometimes comes from evil because of God's grace, but God never wills evil. God never wants us to do something dreadful in God's name. God doesn't invite us to behave badly and blame it on Him.

What is most troubling about this story isn't that Stephen is willing to die for his faith; what is most troubling is that people are willing to kill for God.

After the dreadful events of September 11th, the suicidal hijackers killed themselves and over 2000 people and blamed it on God.

Recently, on the Internet, was the clandestine video of Saddam Hussein's execution. I'm not going to debate his execution but people were troubled by how it happened. He was being taunted, ultimately, in the name of God, as he was put to death.

God is never about evil and when our viewpoint of God brings us and invites us to do evil seemingly in God's name, we are not moving in God's name or will.

The third random strand of this narrative is the character of Saul standing on the sidelines watching.

It is presumed that Saul approves. We don't know for sure, he just stands there and observes.

Saul's conduct is almost the most troubling of all. He is a man of God who doesn't protect Stephen; but he is also a leading Pharisee who doesn't commit himself to the stoning of Stephen. He just stands at the side and observes. Saul is the very definition of lukewarm and not committed.

The thing is we are being set up in a grand way to demonstrate the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. It is this same Saul, this lukewarm, uncommitted Saul, who later has a vision of Jesus and becomes the early church's greatest apostle.

It is this huge reminder to us that when we fail, when we mess up, God is a God of redemption. Saul failed miserably this day and God was able to use him in the future.

The story of the stoning of Stephen is not a story to take totally on face value. It is a story that speaks of the real meaning of sacrifice, it is a story that speaks of using God's name well or badly, and it is a story of redemption.

But at its core, it is a story of a man who followed Jesus, an incredibly devoted person, and was put to death for it. The story has random strands, but let us never lose focus of the heroism and commitment of Stephen, a man we read about getting stoned for Jesus.