

24 February, 2008
Fr. Richard L. Green

Well, greetings on this translated Feast of Stephen. Normally we don't get to celebrate this on its regular day, since it's the 26th of December. I think only once since we've been here has it actually fallen on Sunday, so we just started moving it to the day of the annual meeting so that we can now celebrate our appropriate patronal feast.

And what a story it is. Usually the emphasis is on Stephen the Martyr. And it's all about how he got killed. How he sacrificed his life, but I think it's important to look at the life that got sacrificed. Not just that he died, but that he lived. And *then* how he died.

So Stephen is part of that original Jerusalem community of believers who came together, living in a commune. They shared everything equally. There was a food distribution, and that's where Stephen comes into the story.

It was discovered that there were these Hellenistic Jews who were followers of Jesus, widows with children who were being neglected in the food distribution. Well, the apostles delegate this and tell the community to pick some people out to do this job.

Stephen was among those selected. They laid hands on them, they gave them the job, but Stephen takes it so much further than just passing out the food. He really takes to this job. He begins not only looking after those who were kind of marginalized in their community, because these Hellenistic Jews were marginalized (and that translated into what was becoming the Christian community), but he also began to go out into the community and it says he was performing miracles, wonder-works, out in the community.

We can only imagine what that is, but most of the time it had to do with healing. Healing and exorcism. Not only is he doing that, he's taking the gifts of the spirit out into the community, but he's taking the word out into the community. He's beginning to share the experience of the living Christ with those who are not yet a part of their community.

And to say that he met with resistance is putting it mildly. He met with such resistance that they took him before the authorities and he got stoned to death. But even in his dying, he's carrying the good news to those around him. One has to wonder, since Saul of Tarsus was present (he was the guy saying, "Here, let me hold your coats while you kill this guy"), what might have been the impact there? Because what happened is that, truly following in the steps of Jesus, he prays to forgive them their actions.

And this is our patron. We are the church of St. Stephen. And say, how [are] we doing?

Well. So Stephen cared for the widows and orphans within their community. Looked after those who were marginalized and those in the community who were in need. So how are we doing? Well, one example – and I know that there are many; many

individual acts – but as a community, one of the things that is happening is the Community of Hope. The Community of Hope is a group of people in the congregation who have gone through training and who have made themselves available to you, among others. To you, to the congregation. As a listening ear, as an open heart, as a hug looking for a place to happen. It's a way for us to have individuals who understand the importance of confidentiality, who know how to listen and not just talk, who know how to just sit there and let whoever needs to, unload. They're there and they're available.

And not consciously, but certainly deliberately, this is one way in which we're following in Stephen's footsteps.

Stephen also went out into the world, outside the bounds of his little community. He helped out. He brought miracles. He brought healing. Certainly one of the things this church has done for years, in fact was one of the founders of... In fact, Ruth Mottet was one of the founders of FISH. And every couple of months people come here, as they go to other churches, and they distribute food. I can tell you that for someone who has nothing in the cupboard and only cold air, a flat Pepsi and shriveled up celery in the refrigerator, it is a miracle when that food is handed to them.

I also know that there are individuals in this congregation who, following in Stephen's ministry, are active in various communities around us. On boards, doing various occupations, all sorts of things that reach out into the community and bring that healing touch. Whether it's being on the board of CASA, or the Ethnic Support Council, or the Red Cross or working in social services. Doing whatever it is, there is the presence of the followers of Stephen who was the follower of Christ. Taking that ministry out into this community.

And lastly, Stephen was a sharer of the word. It's very interesting how these things happen. I know that individually any number of you are talking to neighbors, to folks that you know who have been in the congregation, who have left the congregation, who are back in the congregation, who are wrestling and struggling. You are witnessing just with your lives the healing power of Christ.

For some time we have been struggling with how to lower the average age of this congregation. There doesn't seem to be much breeding... so we'll have to find another way, with some notable exceptions, I must admit. And so Kathleen and myself and others are praying. Kathleen was poring over books. She'd come out of cyberspace at times with just that glazed look on her face from all of the research of how you engage this whole issue. What does it take? What do you do? What's the magic formula?

And one Monday, sitting right there in the chancel. The Monday Centering Prayer Group. Kathleen says she's trying to go to a nice, quiet center and meet with God. And what comes up is, 'What about those people who have been married just recently and who are about to get married? Did you ever think of just, talking to them?' (Or words to that effect.)

So we get together, we make up this list, we call these folks – some of them are sitting right here in church – and lo and behold! They wanted to come to dinner at our house! We had a great time together. We didn't have to reinvent the wheel. We just had to reach out and say, *Welcome*.

It doesn't mean that all that research and all that prayer was for naught, by any means. But it's an amazing testimony of how we have to sometimes go waaaaaayyyyyyyyy around something to see what's right in our face. But in fact, what goes on from this church in the way of offering the word of Christ, the healing impact of Christ in our lives, really does go on.

I used to joke that Episcopal evangelism meant that we unlocked the front door and didn't just issue passkeys to the members. Or that you had to be born an Episcopalian. What happened is that when we simply share who we are in relationship with Christ and with one another, there will be people who will say, 'Oh. That sounds like me.' And they will come and they will become part of this community because like tends to attract like. Now that's a like that's a pretty broad like... sometimes it just means that we are all Homo Sapiens Sapiens, but at least there's that.

As followers of Stephen, not consciously but deliberately, we in fact do seem to be following in his steps. Now that's not to say that other churches who may be named after Saint Ralph, or Bob, or Marylou aren't doing the same sorts of things. But for us, we see this through the lens of Stephen. And quite a lens it is. So I would say that we at least get a good solid B+ (and maybe I said that because that's were I graduated), but that we really do emulate Stephen. And to some degree, I sense that we may be taking our licks, too, for standing as a prophetic witness to a particular way of following Christ.

It's not always popular. But we see that as our way, or we wouldn't be here. In so doing, we even – for our tiny little degree – take our licks just as Stephen did in standing up for what we see as the way of Christ. The ongoing evolution of how it is that we follow Jesus of Nazareth.

Later today we will be coming together for our annual dinner and meeting. You will each receive a fairly thick manual. It's got all the reports from all the ministries. I encourage you to read through that, because what I've done is just touched on a few high spots. I would really encourage you to look through the reports of all those ministries and think about how many people are engaged in those different ministries. And how many of those ministries impact our life together and our life together in this greater community.

I said B+. I invite you to think about what you think our grade might be. If you find it wanting, do something about it.

Amen.