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CONCORD
SUNDAY SCHOOL

LECTIONARY
LESSON 19

SUNDAY,
MAY 10, 2020

Acts 7:55-60

55 But 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!"

57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58 Then 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. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Je-

sus, receive my spirit." 60 Then 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.

Background

Acts is the perfect book for us this month for several reasons. First, we as a Church (capital "C") celebrate the birth of our community with Pentecost in May. Secondly, we as a church (lowercase "c," meaning individual church, as in Concord Baptist Church of Christ) are celebrating 173 years of history here in Brooklyn. And thirdly, as we are getting settled into this odd way of living, we need to be reminded that other people have struggled before us. We are not the first in history to go back to the "drawing board" and strategize new ways to live together.

Today's lesson will focus on dealing with death even after Christ's Resurrection.

Read the scripture out loud.

Discuss with someone in your home. Name something or someone really important to you. Why does this person or thing figure so highly in your life?

What's happening during this passage?

Acts is a book wrapped up in the Holy Spirit. This chapter is no exception. In the first verse of our passage, we hear that Stephen was "filled with the Holy Spirit" as he "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus." As he had this vision, people covered their ears, and with a "loud shout all rushed together against him." They then dragged him out of the city and stoned him. In no uncertain terms, what we are seeing here is a state-sanctioned murder. It's violent.

In the middle of the stoning, Stephen said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And then he loudly asked God not to hold this sin against them.

What does the Holy Spirit do here?

Let's go to John 14:26. The writer says, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." The Greek word here for Advocate is "parakletos" meaning "intercessor, consoler, comforter."

We only have a limited vignette of what happened in this text. Given the violence that Stephen had to endure, we can assume that Stephen was scared. Concerned. Maybe his life flashed before his eyes. Maybe he began to feel like he put his life in danger. Maybe he had regrets. But the text tells us that he was "filled with the Holy Spirit." The advocate, intercessor, consoler, comforter was present with Stephen even in his last hours on this Earth. The cause of Christ was so important to him that he was willing to surrender his life for it.

Where else have we heard these words? "Forgive them" and "into thy hands...?"

Stephen's death is similar to the death of Jesus in a few ways. Firstly, they utter nearly the same words as they are actively dying. These are words that Jesus said, too. In Luke 23:34, Jesus begs that his father would forgive those who killed him because they "know not what they are doing." In Luke 23:46, Jesus says on the cross, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Secondly, their death inspires generations as an example of commitment to the Cause. Stephen was one of the first ordained deacons of the church, and later came to be seen as a martyr of the Faith. He was named as a Saint by the Catholic Church.

But there are some differences, too. Most obviously, we know that Stephen does not resurrect. He does not return after three days like Christ. Also, the people who killed Stephen are not "thugs" or even Roman soldiers. They are religious and powerful people. Upstanding men. In today's language, these would be the pastors who have lucrative business with the national office. These are men who get invited to the White House and are happy to smile. Acts 8 begins with Saul "approving of this

killing.” In your own devotional period, continue learning more about Saul’s eventual conversion in Acts 9. Think on this question: What kind of guilt might Saul have had about his past harms even as he was converted? Do you think Saul ever thought about Stephen when he had changed his ways?

What questions do you still have of this scripture? How will you commit to journeying with this text this week?

Connection to Today’s World



We can take a lesson from the creative ways people mourn. Lloyd Porter, co-owner of BreadStuy (and Bread Love) coffee shop in Brooklyn, sadly passed due to complications of the COVID 19 virus. The news of his passing sent shockwaves into the community. People honored him (and the norms of social distancing) with a walk-by vigil, and even began

to raise funds for his young daughter’s future. Stories of his kindness and generosity began to flood the internet. After all, “everyone has a Lloyd story.”

We can’t stop death after it happens. But resurrection is a community act. People don’t have to die in vain if we learn the lesson of their life. As we think of those who have departed from this Earth too soon, how can we create a world that makes living possible?

How do we manage this as a resurrection people? It may feel disorienting and confusing. You might even notice your mental health is taking a toll. For free mental health resources from the City, check out <https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/>.

Journal: What does resurrection mean to you these days?

Closing: Sing “Sweet, Sweet Spirit.”

*“There's a sweet sweet spirit in this place
And I know that it's the spirit of the Lord
There are sweet expressions on each face
And I know that it's the presence of the Lord
Sweet, Holy Spirit, Sweet heavenly dove
Stay right here with us, filling us with your love
And for these blessings, we lift our hearts in praise
Without a doubt we'll know that we have been revived
When we shall leave this place.”*

Prayer:

Dear God,

You are the God who sees, cares, and knows. You hear our cry and you know our needs. We need a taste of resurrection. We need Good News. We are in the midst of historic turmoil. And yet, even in this season, you send a comforter. You send an advocate, an intercessor, a Holy Spirit. We welcome the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

God, we know that evil persists because so-called good folks do nothing. Help us to do the right thing. Help us to speak out when we see evil in the world.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen

Works Cited

<https://www.newsbreak.com/california/fresno/news/oOz65Rrw/fresno-state-graduate-and-new-york-actor-dies-after-covid-19-diagnosis>