



**St. Stephen (transferred)
Jeremiah 26:1-9, 12-15; Psalm 31
Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51c-60; Matthew 23:34-39**

Since I came to start my ministry at St. Stephen's two and a half months ago I've had the same conversation over and over with friends and colleagues. It starts with congratulations on my new ministry. Then we move into enjoying the hilariousness of my being one of two Stephens and a Stephanie on the clergy staff at a parish called St. Stephen's—a phenomenon that's become famous around the diocese. Then, in the third phase of this recurring conversation, is when the stoning jokes begin.

Sometimes it's wry observations about how tough parish ministry can be, with wishes that we won't all get stoned to death. Sometimes it's suggestions for fundraisers or youth activities where the three of us get pelted with Nerf balls spraypainted to look like stones. But one way or another, the conversation always gets around to stoning jokes. It's like that with church people. Mention our blessed patron, St. Stephen the Protomartyr, the first of all the Christians to die for the faith, and the conversation just goes there.

It's funny because it's awkward.

We soften the idea of stoning by talking about it metaphorically as suffering the slings and arrows of life—like the Bob Dylan song from the sixties: “They'll stone you when you're trying to walk home: but I would not feel so all alone; everybody must get stoned.” But of course, the story we heard this morning wasn't metaphorical at all. Stoning is a nasty way to die—and a very public one. I suspect we make jokes about it because the true gruesomeness of the story is simultaneously so repellent and so disturbingly fascinating. From the very beginning, it seems, we human beings have had a fascination with sanctioned violence—with the idea that if we just do away with an identified victim, then justice and peace and prosperity can be restored.

I remember reading the Shirley Jackson short story “The Lottery” in high school. Perhaps you read it too. It’s a depiction of a classic rural American village, full of pickup trucks and neighborly conversation, which practices an annual ritual meant to insure a good crop. An elaborate lottery is used to select a single member of a single household. When a village woman draws the fated slip of paper, she is brutally stoned to death by her friends and neighbors. The experience of reading the story is shocking, yet gripping: as your awareness of what is going on slowly builds, there’s a sense of horror and yet also of almost voyeuristic fascination. It’s horrible to look, yet impossible to look away.

Of course, a big part of the power of Jackson’s story, her craft as an author, is the way she transposes an ancient human ritual so unexpectedly into the familiar modern setting. We might like to think that we modern folk are more enlightened, that we would never fall under the spell of that kind of barbaric mob superstition. But in reality, the spell of officially sanctioned violence holds just as much power for us today. Consider the way we report on executions. In September I heard a radio story about the first execution in Washington State since 2001. The story lasted at least half an hour. The journalist who had witnessed the event offered a detailed account of the condemned man’s last meal and a blow-by-blow narrative of the hours and minutes leading up to the climactic moment, including what cocktail of drugs was used for the lethal injection and how the victim’s family reacted while watching the proceedings from a viewing chamber. It was disturbing to listen to. It was also hard to change the station.

We are fascinated by violence. Even as modern people, with all our self-proclaimed enlightenment, we are still drawn to the old, old hope that somehow, through officially sanctioned violence, we can restore order in the world. Sacrifice the offender, and peace and prosperity will return. It’s an attractive idea—and it often finds its way into religion, from the outright human sacrifice of so many ancient societies to a popular misreading of Christianity that sees the cross of Jesus as a needed sacrifice to appease an angry God.

But the gospel of Jesus actually shatters that myth.

Because the story of Jesus is of a God who comes into the world not as the perpetrator of violence, but as the victim. It isn’t a wrathful God who kills Jesus: it’s a wrathful humanity in our love of violence. In Jesus we meet a God who practices a completely different kind of power from the power we’ve come to expect. Instead of setting things right by labeling and killing the evildoers, Jesus is the one who is labeled and killed as an evildoer. Instead of seeking vengeance on his enemies, he forgives them even from the cross itself. The mystery of the gospel is that love, not violence, is God’s way of working. And paradoxically, that love that seems so weak in human terms is in fact the most powerful force in the universe.

Stephen, our parish’s patron, was a true disciple of that powerfully nonviolent Jesus. Like Jesus, Stephen dies at the hands of human mob violence. Like Jesus, Stephen practices nonviolence with boldness. He resists—but with the truth-telling words of his mouth, not with violence. As the hymn we sang this morning says, Stephen’s only “weapon” is the flame of faith in his heart and the sword of truth on his lips.

Like Jesus, at the moment of his death Stephen prays not for vengeance but for reconciliation

with his killers, asking God to forgive them. Seeing Jesus enthroned in God's glory, his hope is not for his enemies to be destroyed, but to be reconciled with them. And in fact, we see that happening over the course of the book of Acts, as the young man Saul who enters the narrative here, approving of the death of Stephen, will himself become a disciple of the nonviolent Messiah; and as Paul, he will be the foremost apostle of the young church, and will eventually take his own place as a martyr, testifying by his own death to the God who triumphs not by force but by love.

This past week our country celebrated the birthday of a modern martyr, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. It's interesting, and I think significant, that while our society celebrates Dr. King on his birthday of January 15, our church celebrates his feast day on April 4, the day of his martyrdom. In many ways Dr. King's life and preaching exemplified what we celebrate in the story of St. Stephen. King's philosophy of nonviolent resistance required the courage to speak the truth with boldness while rejecting the temptation to use violence—and even, when necessary, while being courageous enough to suffer the violence of others, always with the goal not of destroying one's enemies but of converting their hearts. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood the difference between the world's power, expressed through violence, and God's power. In 1967, a year before his death, he wrote: “The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. . . . Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. . . . Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

Love is more powerful than violence. That is not a platitude: it is a dark and difficult truth, borne out by the suffering of many women and men throughout many generations. In the eyes of the world, violence often seems to win out. James Earl Ray surely felt that Dr. King had lost after his shot felled him that day in Memphis. Stephen's killers must have thought that mouthy deacon had lost as they stood around his lifeless body. And Pilate and his guards surely believed Jesus had lost as his weeping followers took him down from the cross. But in the mystery of the gospel, God's weakness is stronger than human power.

God is not a god of force, but a God of love; not a god of compulsion, but of persuasion. And the same God who strengthened Jesus and Stephen and Dr. King to practice nonviolence with boldness is here today among us. God will not force a way into our hearts and lives. Instead, God gently, insistently, patiently invites us to fall in love.

May you and I fall so deeply in love with God that we have strength to walk the nonviolent way of Jesus, of Stephen, of Dr. King, and of so many others, with boldness. And at the last day, may we join with all of them—and with our enemies—at the heavenly banquet, feasting with Jesus at the right hand of God.

**The Rev. Stephen Shaver
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Seattle, WA**