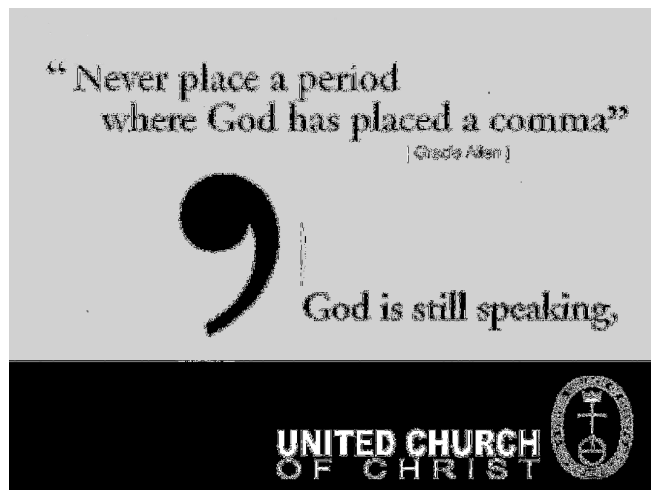


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**SERMON**

**“Do You Want to Get Stoned?”**

**Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer**

**April 20, 2008**

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**Scripture: Acts 6: 1-9, 7: 51-60**

I must say that I was captured this week by the story of the stoning of Stephen. I don't believe that I have ever preached on this text before. I admit I went crazy with the sermon title, flashbacks from the '60s and the '70s', or at least what I read about in history about those glory years. I know we, most of us here, don't take the Bible literally. We, most of us here, rather take the Bible seriously, as an inspired Word for our lives. So, why this story? How did it make it into the good book? Surely we cannot condone the act of stoning, and we abhor that it actually continues to this day in some cultures, mostly Moslem, although stoning is not condoned anywhere in the Koran. So, all those names Stephen, Steve, Stefan, Stephanie, Stephanus, Stephanopoulos, Stevens, Stevenson, Esteban in Spanish, Sven in Swedish, or Mustafa in Arabic can hereby relax and know that this will not be a reenactment text, an object lesson to make the text “come alive in our very hearing.”

As you may know, the act of stoning comes from the Old Testament law of the Levites. When the tribes of Israel, once nomads, all foreign to one another, began settling down together, they needed some laws of how to act together, live together. The priests began to write the laws, the codes of conduct, and the priests were also the ones who were the judge and jury.

Thou shalt not...or else thou shalt be stoned. Stoning was the punishment for, amongst other things, the offenses of adultery, idolatry, breaking the Sabbath, cursing God, goring animals, rebellion against parents, touching Mt. Sinai, and blasphemy. While stoning was a law on the books, there are “only scarce mentions of such a punishment actually being inflicted.”<sup>1</sup> By the time of Jesus, the Jewish laws and courts had been taken over by Roman authority, and we hear the mention of stoning only in regard to the story of the woman caught in adultery.

There were probably several methods of stoning, one of which was that after two witnesses brought charges of an offense, if it was found that the charges had merit, the accused was to be taken outside of the city limits, and was pushed into a pit or a ditch. If the fall onto the rocks below did not kill him or her, the accusers would throw the first stones aimed at the heart, and if that did not kill him or her, the bystanders, the onlookers (isn't that a pleasant thought?), were free to finish the death sentence, whereupon the body was to be suspended until sunset. (Deuteronomy 21:23).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoning>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/punishments>

It was, and is in those places that still unfortunately practice stoning, a brutal punishment, and as we teach our children, there will be no stoning or violence here. We are a peaceful people, a non-violent people. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice and mercy and loving-kindness. Like Stephen.

All of the art, all of the pictures of Stephen show him as a young and innocent face, so eager to help others. The name means “crown” or “wreath” and he is a saint to some, the first Christian martyr to others. While some claim to be martyrs, they are not if their means are bombs or violence. A martyr is one who is willing to stand up for and even die for their beliefs, in peace. They hold fast, in peace. They hold true, in peace. They may trouble the waters. They may challenge the powers that be, but it is in peace for the betterment of the whole.

Stephen suddenly appears in the Book of Acts, when after the wind and fire and Holy Spirit of Pentecost blow, 3,000 new people want to live and believe in Christ. They were Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the harvest festival and they experienced something, they didn't know quite what, that they understood one another despite the barriers of language culture and race. 3,000 new people added to their numbers all in one day. Even Billy Graham and Joel Olsteen don't get numbers like that!

Now I know we want to grow here at Church of the Beatitudes, but 3,000 in one day? What if your businesses grew that quickly? Where would we put them? How would we feed them? Think of the size of the welcome tent we would need and the brownies and the cookies! A good problem to have, but still...

And add to the issue, not just 3,000, but 3,000 speaking different languages, from different countries and clans. “We've always done it this way” just doesn't work anymore.

So in the story, the twelve apostles lay hands on a few good men. Stephen, one of those 3,000, an outsider, a Greek speaking Jew, who had made his annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, got swept up by the Spirit. They needed more hands, more help, and the apostles ordained seven deacons, to look after the people's physical needs so that they could concentrate on the preaching and on prayer. For our Episcopal brothers and sisters, they ordain lay persons to serve as deacons, and then there is a second ordination for priests. In Episcopal structure, some priests become bishops who oversee the church, priests serve a particular congregation and deacons help those who cannot help themselves.<sup>3</sup> My sister is a deacon in her Episcopal congregation and it is generally agreed that the Bishops get to wear the best outfits!

We have some “Stephens” in our midst. We have some people, and we can always have more, who use their gifts for those in need. Many behind the scenes without

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, p. 40.

flash or fanfare take food, give rides, pray. Many behind the scenes, organize food drives and clothing drives, and remind us all how blessed we are and how much more blessed we are when we give away. Last week alone, you gave over 1,300 pounds of clothing and shoes for men, women and children which has been given to homeless singles and families through the Central Arizona Shelter Services, CASS, and the Vista Colina Program. This is on top of, over and above, what you give to Interfaith Cooperative Ministry week after week. Others stock our Bishop's pantry so we can meet the needs of people who come to our door during the week looking for food. We also refer them on to other agencies better equipped to meet the broad range of their needs: shelter, jobs, medical care, medication. You know and I know that the needs in these uncertain economic times are not about to decrease. If I have heard you correctly throughout this Appreciative Inquiry process, you take great pride in being a congregation who not only cares for one another on the inside, but also cares for those on the outside, those in the community. Our positive core, Church of the Beatitudes at our best, will expand and grow our ministries of compassion, comfort and care. While we may not call it Stephen's Ministry, it will be a touch of hope and help. When things that seem simple to some of us, like driving to church, fixing a meal, shopping, become more complex for many in our midst, we want to be there. In a time of growing economic strain not only "out there", but also for many of our own, we are currently exploring the creation of an emergency fund so that people would not lose their homes, not lose their utilities, not lose their insurance. Help reaches out, the gratitude comes back and others are helped. That is a part of the Bible I want to take seriously, even literally, "when did I see you hungry, or thirsty?" We are called not to be served, but to serve. By calling ourselves Progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.<sup>4</sup>

Stephen had this passion and compassion, and maybe the struggle to understand is that maybe he had too much? All he "had" to do was take care of the Greek speaking Jews, especially the widows, so that the disciples could minister to the "real" Jews, the Jerusalem Jews. All he "had" to do was to serve the soup at the soup kitchen. But Stephen did more. He was brimming with energy and he began doing all kinds of signs and wonders. He was healing. He was starting small groups. His excitement sparked the imagination of others. The community could do more, love more, give more, and include more. Why, Stephen even had a plan for growing the endowment to ensure their ministry in the future. "Enough is enough, who is this guy?"

The priests accused Stephen of blasphemy, speaking against the laws of Moses and God. It was punishable by stoning. And while it was clearly trumped-up charges, Stephen valiantly tries to defend himself. He tells the kangaroo court his theology from Moses to Jesus. His appeal to reason is lost and he is dragged outside the city's limits. And while they were stoning him, Stephen fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

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<sup>4</sup> The Center for Progressive Christianity, point 5, [www.tpcp.org](http://www.tpcp.org)

Where have we heard that before? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Yes they did.

Stephen started out by waiting on tables and feeding widows. Who knew it would be so dangerous? My faith started out by my saying at my confirmation, “Sure, Jesus is my way.” And it has led me to soup kitchens, homeless shelters, to marches on Washington, DC, to Pride parades, to escorting women into Planned Parenthood clinics for medical care through screaming mobs. My saying that I will seek to be of Christ’s Spirit has led me to write letters, and to risk vulnerable conversations, even a conversation on Race in America. It has led me to joyfully give an increasing portion of my money to ministries that contribute to making the world a more just and compassionate place. It has led to my being accused of blasphemy, but so far it has not led to a stoning. Calling on the Spirit as my Source and Strength has led me to fall on my knees and pray, “God, send someone else, not me.”

Where has the call led you, and where is the call leading you now? By your baptisms and your confirmations, you have been ordained as deacons, as servants of others, as partners in the creation of a most just and compassionate world. Friends, these are urgent times. Some are calling our “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey” blasphemy. “You really can’t mean everyone is welcome. You really can’t be that diverse, that passionate about justice, that hopeful about building God’s realm here.” It may be blasphemy all over again, but I think we are. I pray we are. I think we can be like Stephen in our day and in our time and with these people and with the next 100, 300 or 3,000 that God sends to us. Will we welcome them too?