



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost September 6, 2015

“Vocation”

(Acts 7:54-60)

Rev. David K. Groth

54Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

COLLECT: O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

For quite a few years Gail and I served as facilitators for PALS (Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support). It's a source of continuing education and support for new pastors and their wives during the first three years of parish life. It can be a rough transition from the seminary into the parish. The surprise often begins when they first arrive. One of our guys, before he went to the seminary, had a PhD in piano performance from a university in Berlin and had been serving as music director of a very large parish in Dallas, Texas. His wife grew up in LA and was hoping to be placed in a large city so she could pursue her career. Their first call? A wee little country parish in south central Wisconsin, surrounded by corn fields on all sides, a parish barely hanging on to life. In one of our late night conversations, I remember him asking, "What on earth am I doing here? What am I supposed to do now and how do I go about doing it?"

It's an important question for all us no matter our age: discovering what you are supposed to do and the figuring out a way to do it. It's a decision we make day in and day out, also in retirement. What am I supposed to do, and how do I go about doing it?

Our text this morning is not one of the more pleasant events of the New Testament. The stoning of Stephen is in a way a story about vocation, not only because of what happens to Stephen, but also because of what happens later to another young man who watched it all unfold. It is also a reminder that vocations can be costly, a reminder that there are no guarantees that good work will always be rewarded.

The first thing that happens after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is that people start talking about it. Common, ordinary uneducated fishermen are standing up in

public places delivering powerful and persuasive speeches. Lots of people are listening and nodding their heads in agreement and stepping forward asking to be baptized and are becoming followers of the Way. After Peter's sermon, 3,000 were baptized that day.

But there are growing pains. It's one thing to be a close-knit band of disciples walking from synagogue to synagogue in Galilee. It's quite another to deal with 3,000 new converts in downtown Jerusalem. They have no building, no staff, no computers, no educational ministry. But it was their custom from the beginning to make sure everyone had enough to eat. Daily they distributed food to those who had none – simple enough when there were ten or twenty. But now 3,000 were just added to their number! Some aren't getting fed. As a matter of fact it's the Greek speaking converts, and they complain they are being overlooked. What to do? Angela Merkel isn't on the scene yet, and besides, austerity is already their prevailing reality. So they get themselves organized and create an administrative structure and find some folks with leadership skills and put them to work.

That's how a young man named Stephen emerges. He's one who has been selected to distribute food. The apostles lay hands on them and they go to work, distributing food, and, as the opportunity rises, raising their voices to tell the story. That's what gets Stephen in trouble. He tells the story just like Peter did, but instead of 3,000 converts, his crowd turns on him and becomes a mob. They take Stephen out and begin to stone him.

Watching over the whole proceeding is another young man at whose feet the men had laid their coats for safe-keeping. His name is Saul, a radical, arch-conservative Pharisee. He has devoted himself to stamping out this new Christian movement. He's looking on with approval as the men hurl stones at Stephen. And my guess is he would never forget the sight of that strong, faithful young man dying for his convictions. With his last breath Stephen uses a paraphrase of the ancient Jewish bed time prayer, "Lord,

receive my spirit.” But Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”, and young Saul of Tarsus would never forget it. In fact, he would shortly have a major change of heart himself. On the road to Damascus he would go through a conversion and would be given a new name (Paul) and would eventually become the most influential voice of the Early Church. He too would die violently, probably with those same words in his heart and perhaps on his lips: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

The Holy Spirit led both Stephen and Saul to a remarkable change in vocation, and what an impact they had. There is no more important task for any of us than discovering what we are supposed to do and figuring out how to do it.

Now here’s the thing: don’t for a moment assume that God only gets involved in our vocations when he needs new recruits for professional ministry. That is, we often assume that to have a calling (which is what the word vocation means . . . it comes from the Latin *vocatio* which means calling) to have a calling we assume means to be called to professional ministry. Everything else, such as becoming a homemaker, nurse, salesperson, accountant . . .) everything else, we assume, is a matter of personal interest, your own private decision with no particular religious significance. But that’s not true at all!

Martin Luther taught that God calls all of us. Each of us has a vocation. Luther said being a good and honest butcher or shoemaker was as holy a vocation as being a priest in the church. That is, God has work for each of us to do, not just the religious professionals. And God uses each of us in our vocations to be his hands in the world. Whether those hands are diapering an infant or assembling an X-ray machine, or balancing a corporate account, they are God’s hands, claimed by God at baptism to accomplish his will and work on earth.

How do you know what God wants you to do? How do you know what your calling is? Again, people assume there should be a voice in the night, a voice like that of

James Earl Jones. It didn't happen that way for me, or for anyone I know. Identifying your vocation is a life-long process of discernment.

A starting point is simply assessing the gifts God has given you. I love the line in *Chariots of Fire* when the Scottish Olympic hopeful, Eric Liddell, is home visiting his family. His sister is trying to persuade him to give up running in order to be a missionary. In response to his sister, Liddell says something like "God has made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure."

In her book *Come Sing*, Jimmie Joe, Katherine Paterson tells the story of a boy whose family sings country music as a group. Jimmie Joe has an excellent voice but hates to sing in public. His grandmother takes him aside to talk to him about his gift. She tells him, "God don't give no private presents."

No private presents. God gives us gifts, talents and skills with the intent that we bless others with them. No matter who you are, no matter how modestly you regard yourself, God has blessed you with skills and abilities that he'd like to use in service of others. Paul wrote, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Sometimes God's calling comes in the form of disappointment. Sometimes our plans and hopes don't pan out. We don't get the job. We don't get into the University's Business School or Nursing School. Sometimes the answer is "no" and we are crushed and wondering "now what?" But when a door closes behind us, in a sense the whole world opens up ahead of us. I keep thinking of how the Lord assured Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future" (29:11).

Sometimes we think of vocation and calling as something we don't want to do and would not choose to do but feel obligated to do. Maybe that's how Stephen felt. Usually, however, I think God wants us to do what we are good at and enjoy doing. He wants us to do that for which we are uniquely gifted. I love the way Frederick Buechner

puts it. “The kind of work God calls you to do is the kind of work a.) that you need most to do [it’s just who you are], and b.) the kind of work the world most needs to have done.” The place God calls you to “is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (Wishful Thinking, 118).

God has work for all to do, even in retirement. What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing? And where does that intersect with the needs of the world? Perhaps you enjoy teaching. I know there are kids in Watertown who could use a tutor. Perhaps you enjoy cooking for others. I suspect Bread and Roses would love to hear from you.

Stephen felt the call of God and became a servant of the Lord. For him there came a moment when he had to do what God prepared him to do. He died for his faithfulness. So do Christians today, everyday: marched single file on a beach in North Africa by their executioners, or hauled off to a work/death camp in North Korea for the crime of owning a Bible. Pray God you and I will not be brought to that moment. But pray God that we will have the faith and integrity and courage to use the gifts God has given us . . . not to hide them or ignore them, or pretend that we don’t have anything to give, but to acknowledge our gifts and put them at God’s service, doing the works he has prepared in advance for us to do.

It’s not just a decision we make once or twice in our lives. It is a daily decision, seldom dramatic, seldom public. But there are times when God summons us to put it on the line – to do and to be what God has created us to do and be. It does not usually mean going to seminary. It does not usually mean quitting what we are already doing and starting all over again. Of course, it may. But mostly it means knowing that God does not give private presents, but does give us unique gifts for the common good. It’s a major part of the Christian life: identifying what you are supposed to do, and then figuring out how to do it.

Finally, in Jesus we see a man who knows exactly what his calling, his vocation is. John 3: 17, “For God did

not send his Son into the world to just the world, but to save the world through him.” That’s who he is. Remember anger and judgment and wrath is his alien work, but having mercy and grace is intrinsic to his nature. That’s his proper work: savior of the world, savior for you and me. And the cross is where his vocation intersects with our deepest needs. The Lamb of God for the sins of the world! We needed him on that cross more than anything. Hebrews 9, for “without the shedding of blood there is not forgiveness” (v. 22) and without forgiveness there is no salvation. And so there’s that ancient bed-time prayer again, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

No private presents. He has forgiveness to give and he gives it, daily in our Baptism. He has forgiveness to give and he gives it through confession and absolution. He has forgiveness to give and he will give it again in, with and under the bread and wine.

No private presents. He has eternal innocence, righteousness and blessedness to give and he will give it to his faithful people on the Last Day.

Just like you, his vocation was to do the kind of work he most needed to do, and the kind of work the world most needed to have done. So Hebrews 12 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (v. 2). Thanks be to God. Amen.

