FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Generous Words* Acts 7:55-60

One of the journals I try to get though every month recently described and reviewed a video game called, *I Am Jesus.*

Apparently, the game follows Jesus from the start of his ministry through the crucifixion to Easter morning’s resurrection. Along the way, the player—who is portraying Jesus—confronts and must vanquish demons and all sorts of evil. He does this in hand-to-hand combat.

I was appalled…and intrigued…in equal measure. I tried to find and download it myself to see what it was like but could not find it in the iTunes app store.

The video game reviewer was also somewhat put-off by the game. His displeasure centered mostly on the idea of the player assuming the character of Jesus himself—rather than the thought of a violent Jesus who even faces down and fights with John the Baptist. Try to imagine that.

As I said, the player wins the game if s/he can face-off with all of the obstacles and move Jesus to Easter morning. Thus, the story we just heard read for us about the stoning of Stephen is not covered—thank goodness. I shudder to think of how the stoning of Stephen would have to be modified, or what would—in the world of this video game—be considered a proper conclusion. What Stephen will always be remembered for are the generous words of forgiveness that were on his lips as he died, the kind of retaliatory violence the review suggested the video game Jesus meted-out is no where to be found.

I cannot imagine that in the world of this game anything like humility, servanthood, or forgiveness would be a virtue. These are just some of the qualities that Stephen exemplifies in the short passage we heard. They are also some of the most vivid ways in which we are supposed to be able to identify a member of this new community of Christ followers—by their humility, their willingness to serve, their patience and self-control, even in the face of adversity.

Stephen was all of these things and was, therefore, a well-respected member in the community for his virtue and his piety. That is why he was the first of the seven men to be chosen from among the community to replace the apostles in the daily duty of food distribution among the widows and orphans. This is because Stephen, it is said, was “full of faith and the Holy Spirit” [6:5] and “full of grace and power,” [6:8]

What happens to him in this morning’s passage—his stoning and death—concludes a series of stories that portray both the flourishing of the earliest Christian community, the reaction to the testimony given by the apostles in the broader community, and the accompanying resistance to that testimony coming from Jerusalem’s religious authorities.

In the earlier chapters in Acts, there are seven stories recounting specific instances of the apostles bearing witness to the redemptive activity of God in Jesus. Their testimony is energetic and convincing as it not only included preaching and prayer, but also healing and the performance of signs and wonders.

They were also not at all shy about declaring Jesus as the Messiah, who, like the prophets before him, has been rejected by his own people, particularly the religious authorities.

Needless to say, these same authorities did not welcome the kind of direct affront to their authority and their actions. On at least two earlier occasions, members of the apostles are brought in to face Jerusalem’s council of religious leaders. On the first occasion, Peter and John are questioned, given a stern warning not to preach and released. [4:21]

One the second occasion, the apostles receive a flogging in addition to another stern warning to stop testifying. [5:40]

By the time Stephen becomes a leader in the community, he is already well aware of the way in which the kind of assertive testimony the others have been offering is going to be received. This does not discourage him even in the least. Stephen also preaches Christ confidently and openly. One gets the impression that he takes every opportunity to talk about Jesus—to proclaim Christ in his preaching, but also to expand on and talk about Jesus in personal interactions, too—openly, enthusiastically.

So, of course, he is also arrested and brought to trial.

Stephen’s story is important for us to hear and remember for a number of reasons. However, there is one reason in particular with which we need to think about and come to terms with. That is: the way in which Stephen’s story has been used as an argument against the Jews throughout these last two-thousand years. Stephen’s story is one of many ways the persecution of the Jews has been justified and has encouraged prejudice and violence.

And this is tragically ironic in that Stephen’s dying words are the generous words of forgiveness.

And so, it is vitally urgent for us to notice that it was not the institution—that is the Law—or the condemnation of the Jewish nation that caused or condoned Stephen’s death. The court had not had a chance to rule for or against Stephen.

Before the court could examine Stephen, he offers forceful testimony against his accusers and the Jewish people throughout history whom, he says, they have always disbelieved and persecuted the prophets among them.

Stephen’s understanding and assertion of the continuing lack of vision and faith of the people sends those listening over the edge of reason and beyond the reach of the authorities, even their own authorities, even beyond the reach of their own senses.

In that moment, they stopped being a council listening and offering a ruling based on the Law and their own beliefs and values. They left all of that behind and became a mob and they did what mobs usually do—no matter what their ethnicity, creed, or race.

Mobs do not listen. Mobs give in to their feelings of impatience with authority and any other rules that are established to guard against emotional outburst and lawlessness. Mobs give into their feelings of powerlessness against laws and reason. Mobs embrace and rely on their numerical strength to work their will on the situation.

This is any mob in any place and time. So long as they are the dominant group in that moment, they can, and often do, become and act like a mob.

This is what Stephen faced. He faced the unmitigated emotion of an angry mob. Yet, even as he felt the rising anger all around him, Stephen saw and experienced something quite different. Through the eyes of faith, Stephen had a vision of Christ. Instead of being alone in the midst of an angry mob, Stephen saw his Savior standing beside God, giving him strength, and a feeling of peace and forgiveness.

Stephen had spoken his truth very plainly, even assertively among people who did not want to listen to him. Yet, he continues to proclaim Jesus as the Christ even as he is being stoned. As he sees Christ in the heavens, his faith and the love he had learned from his faith in Christ, cause him to declare to the others what he is seeing, inviting them to see it, too.

His faith and the love he learned from Christ also causes him to offer forgiveness to the very people who would not listen to him, the very people who were killing him.

To the many of the people in that original crowd, and to many people today, Stephen’s generous last words were foolish. I imagine there are still many people who read or hear Stephen’s story and decide that he was utterly defeated and lost.

Many people would prefer be the muscular Jesus of the video game I described at the beginning of the sermon. Many of us like the idea of resurrection as a victory that includes the subduing, even the annihilation of our opponents.

This is not what is portrayed in Stephen’s story. What Stephen’s story asks us to remember is the utter urgency of the message he offered. In the face of all sorts of violence, Stephen’s generous words of forgiveness and love asks us to remember the tenacity with which he testified even in the most trying of circumstances—all of which is a reminder that martyrdom is not so much about dying as it is testifying.

What Stephen asks us to do is to search our own hearts and lives to see if there is more growth needed to our own faith—not so that we may condemn ourselves or feel ashamed. Rather, Stephen’s story shows us what is possible for ourselves and for the people around us.

It is about holding on to what we know of the love of God as it was shown to us by Christ. It is about coming to believe so deeply that we are never at a loss, we never feel alone, but are free and able to continue on with a calmness of heart and mind in every situation. So free and possessed of calm assurance that we may also come to the conclusion of our lives with the same kind of generous words for those around us.

Friends, as we travel through these days after Easter, listening to the story of the new church that was being formed and the challenges they faced, let us hope and pray that we, too, will find ourselves as moved by Christ’s presence in our lives that we, too, will have the kind and generous words of grace on our lips for one another, for this is the greatest testimony we will ever make. Let this be so. Amen.