

May 14, 2017
Easter 5
Preparing The Way
Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14
The Rev. Dorothy Cottingham
Christ the King Lutheran Church, Tigard, OR

Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ
Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

“Do you need directions?” I asked my friend the first time she came to our house. “Yes, please.”

Long before Siri and google maps . . . I verbally drove the route from her house to mine, pointing out landmarks along the way so that she wouldn't get lost. “Take the first right after the Lutheran Church, that's our church. As you come up the hill the street takes a left and becomes Frenwood Way, our house is the 6th house on the right, the only one with a carport.” Visual, concrete, precise directions describing the way to our house.

Do we need directions on our discipling journey? Yes, please. We have visual, concrete and precise directions from Jesus, today. Directions that calm our troubled hearts. Believe in God and believe in Jesus.

The people of The Way, the early Jesus movement had only this map to guide them. Along with Jesus' promise to do “whatever you ask in my name so that the Father may be glorified”.

Each step of the way they were assaulted by the Jerusalem Jewish leadership.
Observers of the Day of Pentecost thought they were all drunk.
The Temple Council threw them in jail for preaching the good news.
Their friends and neighbors mocked them.

There was internal dissension as well.
The Hellenistic (Greek) Jews complained against the Hebrew (Israelite)
Jews about the daily distribution of food.

The community resolved the issue quickly and sensibly.
They appointed seven of the faithful to oversee the food distribution.
Stephen was one of them.
His tenure is short and dramatic.

Acts 6 describes Stephen as “full of grace and power, doing great wonders and signs among the people”. This gets the attention of the Freedmen of the synagogue. They stood up to argue with Stephen. But Stephen, filled with wisdom and the Spirit withstands their assault. These bigshots of the Temple turn to a group of folks and tell lies about Stephen, instigating anger and hatred against him. They stirred up anger among the people and the elders and the scribes. They riled up these groups to the point that they all went after Stephen, physically.

He was arrested and brought before the council in Jerusalem. What they saw in Stephen's face must have been terrifying...” they saw that his face was like the face of an angel”. (Acts 6:15b) Stephen's response was epic! It is the longest “sermon” in scripture.

Stephen opens the scripture and tells the history of Israel to the Temple leaders.
He reminds them of God's glory and faithfulness.
He reminds them that God promised a Messiah and the Messiah has come.
He reminds them of Israel's history of killing prophets, including Jesus,
because the words of the prophets have been too uncomfortable to hear.

When Stephen finished, the council became enraged, ground their teeth against him and drove him out to stone him.
This is what led to Stephen's death.

A man with the face of an angel, full of grace and power, stoned to death . . . martyred at the hands of the Temple elite using a shame-filled form of death penalty. If you hear familiar words or phrases in the story of the stoning of Stephen, you are not alone. Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God. While they were stoning him, he prayed "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". 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.

When I first noticed these phrases, I didn't want to believe that a mere human's death should be portrayed in this way. These were phrases and actions told about Jesus on the cross. That seems blasphemous.

Remember how Jesus' appearance change on the mountain of transfiguration? Stephen's face is described "like that of an angel". Remember Jesus' words from the cross? "Father, forgive them" and "receive my spirit". Remember the description of Jesus' death? "he bowed his head and died".

What is it about Stephen? What are we to learn from this? Are we to boldly speak the good news, even if it means imprisonment and death? In a word – yes. So, what does it mean to boldly speak the good news? It means integrating our whole lives to be witness to Jesus, the Christ.

Many Christians, too often myself included, live in "the third space". We live between multiple identities and multiple spaces of being.

In THIS place, we are focused on our faith.

In our homes, we are focused on personal and family needs.

In our work, we are focused on pleasing our employer.

It is unusual for these three spaces to intersect. But, we are called to live liminally, that is, in the threshold space, at the intersection of our various roles. We are called to live in the space where the Spirit breaks through awakening our awareness and consciousness.

We find this space by willingly placing ourselves in a place of "encuentro," or encounter with peoples of a different life and faith experience. We are called to leave the familiar for the unfamiliar, to leave the comfort of the known so that we encounter the discomfort of the unknown. It is at this intersection, this liminal space that we find a place for reflection that leads to new awareness of who we are called to be. We are called to encuentro with those who are in pain.

Mother's Day can be a day of pain, a day when we can walk with the one in four women who have experienced a miscarriage. The mother who has experienced a stillbirth or the loss of a little child. The mother who hoped for an adoption that fell through. The woman who longs to be a mother and cannot. The mother whose child is estranged or imprisoned.

We are called to encuentro with those who have lost their mother. Those whose mothers were abusive, neglectful or absent. Those who have been rejected because of their gender identity. Those who never knew a mother, but have two loving fathers.

Stephen is a reminder of how we are called to live as people of The Way, The Truth and The Life. It is unlikely that we will be imprisoned like the apostles or stoned, like Stephen. But, it is worthy of serious reflection to consider how will our way of living glorify God? How will we integrate our whole lives in service and praise to God? How will we heed the stirrings of the Holy Spirit? On whom will we depend for directions?

There is a new directions app for your electronic device called "My Way". And people still get lost. There is no need for an app or a map to find The Way. Jesus Christ is The Way, The Truth and The Life.

This is the good news: Jesus Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

Thanks be to God!