

The Cost of Discipleship©

Luke 14:25-35; Acts 7:51-8:3

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Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

Acts 7:51-8:3 The Message (MSG)

⁵¹⁻⁵³"And you continue, so bullheaded! Calluses on your hearts, flaps on your ears! Deliberately ignoring the Holy Spirit, you're just like your ancestors. Was there ever a prophet who didn't get the same treatment? Your ancestors killed anyone who dared talk about the coming of the Just One. And you've kept up the family tradition—traitors and murderers, all of you. You had God's Law handed to you by angels—gift-wrapped!—and you squandered it!"

⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶At that point they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and invective. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—he only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing at his side. He said, "Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God's side!"

⁵⁷⁻⁵⁸Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them.

⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life." Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Master, don't blame them for this sin"—his last words. Then he died.

Acts 8

¹⁻²That set off a terrific persecution of the church in Jerusalem. The believers were all scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. All, that is, but the apostles. Good and brave men buried Stephen, giving him a solemn funeral—not many dry eyes that day!

³And Saul just went wild, devastating the church, entering house after house after house, dragging men and women off to jail.

This past Friday night and part of Saturday morning, Fred and I had the joyful pleasure of having our grandchildren overnight. One thing we observed is that they have developed an ugly practice of being normal siblings, especially at the ages of 8 and 6. They squabble and argue and even bop each other on the head once in a while. The little one is certainly not necessarily the innocent one either. She can start a fight and

then end up being hurt and crying but she is feisty enough to take up for herself and give it right back to her brother.

They are pretty good at accusing each other of wrongdoing; blaming the other one for saying or doing things that hurt them – and blowing it up way out of proportion.

One thing I noticed that Izzy does when Andrew is trying to talk to her – sometimes trying to reason with her, although it is a bossy reasoning – She does what we hear the people doing in this passage when Stephen was talking to them, trying to make his point – she covers her ears and says very loudly – bladllalaldlalalaldlal!

That, of course, makes Andrew all the more mad.

When I read about how the Jewish leaders acted because of what the new Christians were able to do in Jesus' name – these Jewish priests and religious leaders being so resentful and jealous– so mean and hateful – I think how extremely childish they were. Of course, they were in power and they were adults so their childish ways were also extremely harmful and dangerous. We saw that with what they did to Jesus.

Of course, we aren't just talking about two little children – siblings that are self-centered because they *are* children – we are talking about a very serious situation with one of the chosen followers who was ordained a deacon to care for the people in the new Christian community.

We are talking about serious lies and accusations that lead to a violent death for Stephen. We see what Jesus said about being willing to give up everything – family, our own self interests, even our own life. We see that come to reality in the story of Stephen.

Stephen is one of the early martyrs for the church, martyred for the sake of the message about Jesus that was spreading rapidly since his death. The original definition of a martyr is to be a witness. Stephen witnessed to the good news of God's amazing love and grace and forgiveness; he witnessed to the belief in the power of God to raise Jesus, the Messiah who was killed, from the dead. But Stephen also witnessed to the vision he saw before him even as he was being stoned to death. Jesus and angels were in clear view, causing Stephens face to look like that of an angel, Luke tells us in Acts.

But perhaps the greatest witness he could have given was, right in the midst of being pelted with stones, just before he died, he prayed in a voice that all could hear – “don't blame them for this sin.”

Reminds us of Jesus words, doesn't it? “Love your enemies and pray for them; Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

You see, the Jewish leaders were angry because they could not afford to lose power. They had to keep the upper hand on the Jewish people because to lose it meant they lost their place. They lost the protection of the Romans too. They had to keep the status quo so that things didn't change and get out of hand.

But the other thing was that they were very stuck in their ways. Stephen called them stiff-necked people (Peterson calls them "bull-headed.") They had a saga – a history that began with Abraham and moved to Moses and the rescue of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, they had a long proud history of rituals and laws and they had a temple where God lived and where they ruled and kept watch.

They accused Stephen, as they had Jesus, of blasphemy, of saying things against God and of telling lies about Moses and the law. But Stephen preached and went through the entire history of the Israelites, which they could not argue with. He had it right.

What they didn't like was his calling the temple a shrine, an idol, or saying how the people had been rebellious and had turned to other gods even after the one true God had saved them. And how they had not listened to the prophets and how they did not recognize Jesus as the long awaited Messiah and instead, killed him.

The temple was held in such high esteem that to say anything about it was cause for great anger and horrific results. Stephen argued that God was not just in the temple, but God was everywhere for all the people.

His speaking out – his faithful discipleship – was very costly indeed.

But how does this relate to us, to the Church today? Do we ever act like bull-headed, stiff-necked people? Do we get so stuck in the way we've always done it that we can't perceive that God just might be doing something new among us? That maybe new life has to come with change.

The Church (not just Holy PC, but the Church universal) has a great history of fighting over change, of calling people names and of being so stuck in a rut that we can't see ahead and see new possibilities. Even the smallest, most unimportant detail can become a point of dissention among God's people sometimes.

The two little churches I had the honor of serving as a student pastor while in seminary butted heads over a Christmas tree. They were meeting together – one month in one sanctuary and the next month in the other. It was the tradition of the congregation we were meeting for that December to put up an artificial tree. But it was the tradition of the other congregation to have a live, freshly cut tree. The other congregation went ahead and cut a tree and brought it to the church where they were worshipping for that month.

You would have thought they had committed some unforgivable sin! How dare they assume the right to just bring in a tree without asking? We've never had a live tree before and we're not going to start it now!

Of course there was a good deal of other "stuff" going on deep down – the real stuff that was harder to admit. They had declined in membership so drastically that they could not afford their own pastor, thus they were forced to share a student pastor with a nearby congregation.

They had lost their own right to make all the decisions about their church, they were now having to consider what another congregation wanted and needed. They were being challenged to be the mature, loving, forgiving Christians they claimed to be. They were being challenged to act like adults and not squabbling, fighting children.

When change comes around, we don't really embrace it too well. At least many of us don't. That story was a simple, little illustration of a small thing that got blown up.

But look at the history of Christianity – at the story of the Church that Christ established. Stephen – and most of the apostles – and many men and women – were murdered because of change – because of a shift in beliefs and a commitment to follow and that meant great change. The Reformation is a good example of a much bigger conflict than a Christmas tree. People were killed, people gave their lives for what they believed was right.

In our own church we are seeing changes – you've had a change of pastors several times in recent years; ways of doing Sunday School; new hymnals; contemporary worship (sort of), a new Narthex; change of staff; and various other little changes. And I think it sounds like, for the most part, this congregation has handled the changes very well.

Of course, we have some big changes facing us – the possibility of a new structure with part of our building. Some believe firmly that it is absolutely necessary – others aren't so sure. We have different ideas about how to go about making those changes. We resist doing many things different from how we've always done it. And that is not unusual. It is understandable because we are people and change is hard.

But the thing is, if we aren't willing to grow into the changes that will come in this new, digital age, with a new generation of people who practically speak a different language than many of us do – we will be left behind.

Those of us who have been meeting at my house on Thursday nights have been praying for our congregation, for the church, for the unity and commitment to love one another through it all. We have been discussing ways that we can step up how we do worship and how we go the extra mile with showing hospitality to each other and to visitors. We

are having deep and good discussions about being the church – a vital, healthy congregation.

What does it cost to be a disciple? For some – people like Stephen and many others – it cost them their lives. Those believers before us gave everything so that the church would grow and be alive into future generations – like us today.

The cost of being a disciple today – in some countries – is still a dangerous endeavor. Not everyone is as free to worship and to speak about Christ as we are. We are so free to do it that we sometimes take that freedom very lightly and seldom do it, I fear.

The cost of discipleship for us – for the mainline, traditional churches who have a long history, just as the Jewish people do – a story that goes back to the Reformation and even beyond – for us the cost just may be a decision to let go and to face and even embrace the winds of change that the Holy Spirit is blowing our way.

From the little things that can get blown out of proportion so easily, to the big, costly ventures, we may have to give up the “way we’ve always done it” and embrace a new, fresh outlook and way of doing things – from how we do worship to Christian Ed, to fellowship events and outreach.

Lest you think I have some big plans for creating change – think again! I am along for this windy, spiritual ride with all of the rest of you; looking and waiting to see what the Holy Spirit is doing among us; willing to lead us into it when the time is right. I am pretty sure, though, that God is certainly doing something big with us.

Tom Wright says about this very thing in his commentary on Acts: “It’s a matter of watching for the places, both in the story and in our own lives, where suddenly God wants to reveal himself afresh. There are burning bushes, or near equivalent, all over the place, if we knew where to look. What new stories will people tell in days to come as they look back at our church and ask what new things God was doing in our day?”¹

We just might have to get ourselves out of the way – our desires, our ego’s, our stubborn determination to hang on to the old – and we may have to hang on, instead to one another, loving, listening and working together to discern where God is leading us and how that looks.

The cost of discipleship is as Jesus said, ‘to not put anyone or anything, including ourselves, above following him; to be willing to pay the price for him. We can do that, only because of the power of the Holy Spirit among us.

¹ N.T. Wright, Acts for Everyone, part one, p. 115, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008

With the Holy Spirit, anything can happen. And it probably will! Amen.

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