

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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Clarksburg, WV

Acts 7:54-60

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59 N.R.S.V.)

A Believable Witness

Have you ever noticed that some people seem to believe that they are called to be God's enforcers, while others believe that they are called to be God's witnesses? In our text from Acts we meet both of these types of people. The religious authorities of the day believed that they were called to be God's enforcers. They had Stephen stoned to death because he was such an effective witness for Christ.

Then there is Stephen. Stephen was called to be a witness. He is the hero of this story. He wasn't winning people to Christ by telling them how wrong they were and how right he was. Stephen's words and actions glowed with the light of Christ's love. And so lovely was that light that others wanted what he had.

Stephen's witness was so effective that even the super zealous enforcer, known as Saul of Tarsus was impressed. We are not told in so many words that Saul was impressed. We are only told that he was holding the coats of those who threw the rocks. However, it is not a stretch to believe that the power of Stephen's witness helped prepare Saul who would later be called the Apostle Paul, for his Damascus Road Conversion. Paul would later become one of the most effective church planters of the first century and the author of much of our New Testament. Without Stephen, there might not have been a Paul.

So I invite you to think with me about what made Stephen such an effective witness for Christ.

First and most important, we are told that Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. People are not brought to Christ by the power of clever human arguments. Many of us are intimidated because we fear that we do not know enough, are not smart enough, or somehow just don't have the right words to be an effective witness for our faith. This is a needless worry. Christ has promised us that the Holy Spirit will provide us everything we need to be his witnesses. So are words and our actions are given real power, convincing power, convicting power, by the Holy Spirit.

Second our witness needs to be genuine, such that our talk matches our walk, and our walk matches our talk. None of us does this perfectly of course. We are all sinners and there will be times we stumble. Still our light will shine and draw others when we are willing to go beyond

the expected in our love for others. That is, after all, the standard the Christ set for us.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus has this reminder. I am reading from Matthew 5:43-48 from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, "The Message."

You're familiar with the old written law, "love your friend," and its unwritten companion, "Hate your enemy." I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best - the sun to warm and the rain to nourish - to everyone, regardless: the good and the bad, the nice and the nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the mill sinner does that.

In a word, what I'm saying is, "Grow up." You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

Being an effective witness is not automatic or easy. It requires some intention and effort on our part. It is helpful from time to time to challenge ourselves with this question. What am I doing that is different from a nice, respectable atheist?

The third thing that makes an effective witness is the little things. Most of us when we think of an effective witness dream of a home run - big thing. Stephen had one of those big thing moments when he was praying for the forgiveness of the very people who were stoning him to death. That was impressive, no doubt about it.

I want to point out, however, that Stephen was an effective witness before that. He was so effective that the pharisees were afraid to let him live.

The big things count, but so do all of the little everyday things.

I was reading about a man named Gottfried Osei-Mensah who was a leader in the church in Africa. Osei- Mensah tells about the witness of an English missionary who brought him to Christ. The missionary was the headmaster at the mission school he attended as a young man.

The first thing that impressed Osei-Mensah about the head master was that he called him by name. Many of the English men and women never bothered to learn the African's names. The names were often hard to pronounce and you have to care about someone as a person before you learn their name. It made an impression on young Gottfried that the headmaster cared that much for him.

One day Gottfried went to a Bible class the headmaster was conducting. He was late for the class and as he came in the door, he noticed that all the seats were full. He hesitated, thinking about

quietly slipping back out. But then the headmaster looked up and saw him. Immediately the headmaster said, “Gottfried, come on in, I have a seat for you right here.” The headmaster then presented him with a chair. It was the headmaster’s own chair. Gottfried says, “To my utter mortification the headmaster sat on the floor.”

Those two simple acts of love. Caring enough to learn his name and giving up his chair for him so impressed the young Gottfried that he was led to give his life to Christ.

Years later Gottfried saw the headmaster in England. He went up to him and told him how much those two simple acts of love had meant to him. Interestingly enough, the headmaster could not remember those actions at all. Those simple, little acts of love were so much a part of this earnest disciple of Jesus Christ that he did not realize the impact they made. (Dynamic Preaching, April-June 2017, pag. 42)

So now we come to the participation part of this sermon. One of the ways we learn to be effective witnesses is by thinking about the people who were instrumental in bringing us to faith in Jesus Christ. The other thing about this exercise is that this is a way of encouraging each other. Unless someone tells us that something we said or did made a difference in their coming to faith, we may well get discouraged.

So what I would like you to do is to take the blank piece of paper from your bulleting and begin writing a thank you note to someone who was instrumental in your faith walk. Since this is mother’s day, I would encourage you to pick a woman for your thank you note. Doesn’t have to be your mother or grandmother, just a woman in your life who has helped you come to faith.

I will give you about six minutes to work on this. That may not be enough time to finish your note. But I hope that you will take it home with you and finish it. And if the person is still alive I would encourage you to mail it to them. These kind of notes can be so thrilling and encouraging to get.

Repeat instructions.

Amen.