

Sermon

May 7, 2023

Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee

It is my pleasure and my joy to be with you today. As I often say, this is the best part of being Bishop, but really this *is* the best part of being Bishop, is being with you. It's worshipping together, praying together, singing together, and being the Body of Christ together. Those of you who aren't sure what it means to be what a bishop is, or what the Northwest Washington Synod is, or what the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is, I'll just give you a one-sentence answer on that, which doesn't encompass everything: the word "*Synod*" comes from the word "to journey together, or to walk together" and so, together with you, there are 113 other congregations who journey together, we walk together, and so we're Synod together. We are church together, we are the Body of Christ together. And so "Bishop" is a fancy word to say that I am the pastor with you in that journey. Together we are the Synod. So here at Queen Anne Lutheran Church, you have Pastor Dan, and you also have me; I am the pastor of all of those congregations, so we are walking and journeying together, and I'm so grateful for you and for how you share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others, and how you listen and learn and care for others in your midst. So, thank you. It is my pleasure and joy to be with you and to work and journey with you as your sister in Christ.

I will also say as I begin this sermon that these scriptures are a little depressing, so, sorry, I just have to say it!

And now grace and peace to you from our Creator and from our risen savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

These stories from Acts, and from John, today are not the typical Easter-season stories. They are not triumphant. They are not joyful. In this season — as you know, we're still in the Easter season, and we're still (well, *every* Sunday we celebrate Jesus's resurrection) but we still are in the Easter season, where we *really* celebrate Jesus's resurrection. And so, we still sing Easter hymns, and we shout "Alleluia," and it seems a strange choice for the scriptures today, that the first reading is about the church's first martyr, and the Gospel story is a part of Jesus's speech that he is giving to his disciples the night that he's betrayed and arrested.

Not very Eastery.

I mean, it's hard to sing, "Jesus Christ is risen today!" when we have these two stories before us. It's hard to shout, "Jesus is risen, Alleluia!" when we are hearing in one story about rocks being thrown at one man's head, and in the other story, betrayal, leading to being nailed on a cross.

We must remember that both of these people died because of mobs and religious conviction. But maybe in today's world, these are the various stories we need to hear. Because sometimes even in the Easter season, sometimes it doesn't feel very resurrectionary. (Don't use that word. I just made it up.)

Sometimes life seems brutal, and hard. And truthfully, if we take seriously that we are “people of the cross,” we are mindful that Easter is not all about victory. In the Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples on that fateful night, what we know as Maundy Thursday, that he is leaving, that he is going to be gone. In the book of Acts, the story of Stephen reminds us that the stakes are really high.

These stories tell us that Jesus is never really about glory and pageantry. As much as we celebrate and know and trust that Jesus is the risen Lord, it was never about glory. These stories remind us that, just as in the past, we know that today, the good news of Jesus is not always heard. Even by those who say they follow Jesus. I would venture to say, that sometimes *we* don't hear the good news of Jesus. Unfortunately, tragically, really, the story of Jesus's resurrection does not stop the human race, including religious people, from spilling blood, and resisting God's mandate of love, and grace, and justice.

Remember, the people who killed Stephen were not the thugs of their society. They were, as far as we can tell from scriptures, upstanding members of religious communities. They were elders, religious professionals. Priests. They were guardians of vital traditions. They were important people who were worried and upset by what Stephen was saying. I mean, in chapter seven, before he was killed, Stephen *did* make some pointed accusations and he did challenge the understanding that the temple was to be in Jerusalem. But where did they get the idea that *stoning* was a justified response to his words? Okay, it does say in Leviticus 24:16, “One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death. The whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer, aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the name shall be put to death.”

So it does say that, but *still*, in Acts 6, we read that it seems Stephen's only crime was performing – and this is a quote – “performing great wonders and signs among the people.” He's performing great wonders and signs among the people! But then when he's doing this, when he's performing these great signs of wonder, religious folks begin to argue with him. And *then* they get some people to lie about what he's saying, about what he's doing. And *then* he ends up before the council, and then he's run out, and he's killed by this mob, one rock at a time.

So why did they go to such an extreme? Were they just terrible people? I think we know the answer. And it's not just because of Leviticus 24:16. In fact, they might not have even known that verse. You see, the people who stoned Stephen, are not that far removed from us, or from our society.

We know, because violence has often been the answer towards someone that we disagree with. Or they say some hard truths to us that we don't want to hear. Or they just seem different, or odd, or scary. If I asked each one of you here, you could all share a story of violence against someone, or a group of people, or perhaps yourself. We all know those stories. And we all know those stories of other people who have been hurt because of violence.

I finished writing this sermon yesterday probably around three o'clock. So I don't even have reference in my notes about the last shooting that we've had in this country, in Texas. It goes on and on, right?

A few weeks ago, flyers were placed on cars in the parking lots of both Edmonds United Methodist Church and Holy Spirit Lutheran Church in Kirkland. These flyers were placed on the cars, and they spewed anti-LGBTQ hatred. And these flyers were placed on the cars because of both these congregations' stance on being a positive force, and being a community of welcome to LGBTQ people.

This congregation is that as well.

The flyers were vile and hateful. And as I said, we've had so many shootings of innocent people day after day after day, I can't even keep up, with how many there are. We had the one yesterday of nine people, including the shooter, and then we have people who drive into a driveway that's not their own driveway. And then we have people who try to get into the wrong car, they think it's their car, but it's not and they get shot – and these stories just continue. There are schoolchildren and teachers who are gunned down at school, and black men are shot for being black, and racially-motivated beatings and killings have been part of the United States history up until now, today.

Throughout this world, throughout this world, we hear of governments systemically killing groups of people simply because they will not follow what the government has decided, is the way of the government, or they're a part of a community that is not welcome. These stories – and as I said, each one of you could do story after story after story – these stories illustrate violence's effectiveness as the ruling powers' defense against the Gospel, the good news of Jesus and what Jesus means.

This mob, in the book of Acts with Stephen, this mob took violence into their own hands with Stephen, and I'm sorry to say, we do it too, individually and collectively. Sometimes we hear these stories, and we must speak the truth, because, and the truth sometimes is, it seems as though the mob is winning.

But here's an even greater truth: If the Easter story means anything at all, it had better mean that God promises an end to this, and that God can save us from ourselves.

So, let's leave this story of Stephen for a minute, and go to the Gospel of John. The Gospel we heard today is where Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples, and he's giving a speech. And as a reminder, this is the night that he washed his disciples' feet. When he first said, "This is my body. This is my blood." The night Judas slipped out of the room, and the night Judas kissed him in order to betray him. The night all the disciples fell asleep. The night Peter cut off the guard's ear and Jesus healed the guard's ear. The night Jesus was wrongly arrested.

That's the night we're talking about. That's the night Jesus gives this speech. So hear these words again, that Jesus says to His disciples:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also; and you know the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you’re going, how can we know the way?” and Jesus said, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, then you know my Father also; from now on you do know him, and have seen him.”

So, as you hear that Scripture today, are there any times when you normally hear that that scripture? What’s a time when you hear that scripture? *Funerals*, right? We hear this sermon, or this Scripture all the time at funerals. Pastor Dan, Pastor Leslie, we have all preached on this scripture many times at funerals, and it’s a beautiful scripture for funerals. We hear the promise that our loved ones will have a place with God.

But there’s a lot more to this Scripture than just that. And so I want to look at: what do these words mean for us today, in the midst of all that’s happening in our world, in the midst of the tumult that we feel, in the midst of all of the violence, all of the hatred, that is here?

So as you hear these words, let me ask you: Do you hear the promise that Jesus gives in these words – not just after death, that’s there – but what is the promise that we hear *for us today*? Did you hear anything in there?

It was said at the Children’s Sermon. (That’s the hint.) I mean, that’s what you were using for the Scripture today, right?

There is a dwelling place. There is a *place*. There was a home, we saw the home that the children looked at, right? *We’ve been given a promise*. Jesus says, where he is, we will be also, and, where we are, Jesus is.

Jesus promises that He is the Way and the Truth and the Life. That means that together on the way, in the truth, we are life together. With Jesus and with one another.

There are so many promises in this one little paragraph in John, and it goes deeper and deeper. We are promised that there is a new day, a new way, a new world, a new way of being, a new way of loving. This promise that Jesus gives to His disciples and to us is that God promises, *God promises that there is an end to the violence, selfish, uncaring ways that we see and participate in*. It means that even in the midst of all of this, God promises the Way.

In the story of Stephen, as he was dragged from the city, and as people began murdering him with stones, as people closed their eyes and ears to possibility and instead acted out of hate and fear, as Stephen, lovely Stephen, began bleeding, he already knew what Jesus had said to the disciples, he was already living that promise. He already knew in his body, that promise.

He knew that Jesus was with him in that moment, in that horrible moment. He knew that he was not alone. No matter how hard the stones were thrown, no matter what, the stones could not separate Stephen from God. For the dwelling place of Stephen was with Jesus, and the dwelling place for Jesus is always, always with his beloved.

And so that means from the time Stephen did his work, from the time he became deacon, and this moment when he was going to take his last breath, Jesus was his dwelling place – and beyond. We know Stephen knew this, because the moment before he was overtaken by the mob, Stephen looked up and he saw Jesus, as it says in Acts 7:56, Stephen said, “I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” And in that moment, Jesus gestures and is with Stephen. In that moment, Stephen and Jesus are joined together. And we know this because even after the crowd assault him with stones, even as Stephen is executed, Stephen, almost word for word echoes Jesus’s words from the cross, w Lord Jesus receive my spirit Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

A remarkable connection between Jesus and Stephen in the dwelling place that is here, in the dwelling place of God’s love, and presence, and wholeness. And this connection, this connection cannot be broken. This is a connection that, even people who were so sure they were doing something *right*, like killing someone, cannot divide. This is a connection where even an enemy of Jesus is present. And the connection goes beyond Stephen, to wrap around this enemy.

Who else was there at this that we know?

Saul, Saul was there, we all know Saul, if Saul didn’t have this experience, we’d have a very short New Testament! But Saul was there. Saul was there holding the cloaks of the people who were stoning Stephen. And even in that, even in that, while Saul had not found his way yet, had not found *the Way* yet – the Spirit was working on him, bringing him to the dwelling place of Jesus.

Fundamentally, as horrible really as this story is, as wrong as it is, as much as we continue to lament Stephen’s death, there is this *hope* that permeates this story as well. There is something more than a tragic story. There is this connection, this joining, this dwelling place, this love, *God’s love*, that even hatred and death cannot separate. We know Stephen knew this, and Saul – Saul who becomes Paul – we know what happens with him! And we feel this, even, even at this moment, Jesus, wrapping around Saul and saying, “I will take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.”

For us today, we hear so much of the hatred and the violence, the antisemitism, all of the separation of people, the discourse that sometimes makes us feel empty and alone and wondering. And yet, we have His promise that even now, we are living in this dwelling place, now and forever. We are joined together in Christ and in Christ’s love.

And so, I say to you, my Beloveds: Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, for we are in the dwelling place of Christ.

Amen.