



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Be Like Stephen" (Book of Acts Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

If your name is Stephen, be proud of that name. It is a name rich with heritage from the beginning of the early church.

The name Stephen comes from the Greek name *Stephanos*, which means "a crown of victory." In fact, it is such a great name and has such a history that we have a ministry here called Stephen Ministry, a ministry that is the epitome of caring for members who need high-quality, confidential, and Christ-centered care because they are hurting.

Today's sermon is about Stephen, one of the first seven deacons in the church and the first Christian martyr—the first one to lose his life for the sake of the gospel.

The Greek word for "martyr" is *martus*, which means witness. Ultimate witnesses are those who give their lives for what they know or have seen as witnesses no matter what the consequences.

Stephen was the very first martyr for the church.

When our church tour group went to Philippi, one of the first things we saw was the city's ancient amphitheater that held around 4,000 people. (A picture of the amphitheater was shown). When we first got there, I thought, "How cool! Look at this structure!"

We were told of the theater dramas that were staged there. But then the tour guide said that the amphitheater was also used for horrible purposes. We were told that the amphitheater floor has a trap door (picture of the amphitheater trap door was shown), and out of that trap door came lions and other wild beasts that sprung out to kill Christians, entire families of Christians. There were also gladiators who chased and killed the Christians. To the Philippians back then, that was entertainment and justice for these weird people called Christians.

It made me pensive and deeply troubled to stand there thinking of how we are here today because of the courage of the first Christians. They had spread the news about Jesus Christ, up to the point of losing their lives just so that the message about His saving grace will reach us today, millennia later.

Standing there, I prayed to God to tell Him of my respect and admiration for the martyrs. Other people on our tour group had other responses. One person on our tour jumped for joy (a picture of Pam Chun jumping was shown) perhaps to celebrate the fact that the killing of Christians to snuff out Christianity had failed because Christianity continues to thrive today. I came away so grateful for the martyrs.

Our text today is incredibly long and rich. It goes from Acts Chapter 6:7 all the way to Chapter 8 verse one—68 verses! Yes, that's what we call a Bible reading! You can read this long

passage later on your own, but for our purposes today, I am going to focus on who Stephen was and how he could be a model for us on how to live the Christian life.

We'll pick up from where we left off last week, where the early church is exploding in growth—some 3,000+ new believers in one day and great numbers being added daily.

The Apostles created the office of the Deacon to help with the distribution of food to those in need, especially the widows and the orphans. Seven deacons were chosen, and Stephen was one of them.

Acts 6:7 The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 6:8 Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Acts 6:9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen.

Acts 6:10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

Acts 6:11 Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."

Acts 6:12 *They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council.*

Acts 6:13 They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law;

Acts 6:14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us."

Acts 6:15 And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

This is the word of God.

There are two traits of Stephen that I want to highlight in verse 8: He was full of grace and full of power.

First, he was full of grace. That phrase is familiar to us. Stephen was full of grace, and Mary was full of grace, but we normally don't slow down to think what that means.

One of the hardest things in life is to live fully, completely, and thoroughly of grace. It's hard to be known for one's grace. If our church had to err towards the law or towards grace, I would hope we would err on being too much on the side of grace. The fact is we are all sinners who need grace.

I am fully aware that our state has been rocked with a special legislative session. I am still committed to not using my preaching time to be political. So rest assured I haven't changed my mind on that for today.

However, I felt in recent weeks that the statewide Church (with the big

"C") has not been seen by the public as the source of grace, or a place of refuge of grace. And, yes, while I believe there are certain lifestyles that God desires us to live, I would never want to use the pulpit or have our members condemn any people.

In the past weeks people have carried signs at our State Capitol condemning a certain lifestyle as being an abomination, according to the Bible. While our church is traditional in many ways—with traditional, biblical, orthodox beliefs including marriage— I would want our church to be known as a place of grace. As our mission statement reads: "love God, love people, reach the world for Christ." It is not our place to throw stones at those who don't believe our traditional ways.

One of the signs at the State Capitol that was pictured in the Star Advertiser said, "Repent or perish." But I would rather have it say, "Repent and receive grace." To me, that shows the amazing love of our Heavenly Father.

Stephen was all about grace. He was full of grace; that is how he was described in the Bible. I know there are people who feel that it is the job of the Christian to say, "go and sin no more." And while there may be cases where that needs to be said, one really has to first earn the right to say that.

To help us understand what grace really means, let's go to the story in the Gospel of John chapter 8 where Jesus says the phrase "Go and sin no more" in the King James Version. Here's John 8:2-11 in the New Revised Standard Version, the version we normally use, which pretty much says the same thing:

John 8:2 Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

John 8:3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been

caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them,

John 8:4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.

John 8:5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

John 8:6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

John 8:7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

John 8:8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

John 8:9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

John 8:10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

John 8:11 She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Imagine, caught in the act of adultery and brought into a public square. Frightened and scared, the woman is thrown to the ground in front of maybe 10, 20, 30, 50 men who were strangers to her and who were also the religious leaders of the community, the elders, were there staring at her, and perhaps some with stones in their hands. They're standing there, maybe filled with hatred, vengeance, and false justice, ready to launch the stones in their hands, when suddenly, a real hero shows up, not John Wayne or Jet Li, but Jesus!

The men asked Jesus, “Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (John 8:5)

Imagine how scared the woman must have been for her life. This could be it. I could be stoned. And it will be extremely painful. I could die!

The Bible says in verse 7 that they kept on questioning Jesus. So it wasn’t just that one question, it was a barrage of questions: What do you say, Jesus? Come on Jesus, what do you say? Cats have your tongue? You too dumb to reply? Shall we hit her now, huh, Jesus? Give us the word and the stones will fly.

But calm Jesus—full of grace (a phrase that the first chapter of the Gospel of John used to describe Jesus), to whom Stephen committed his life and promised to live like—quietly writes on the ground instead. And then finally, Jesus says to the crowd, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

And then perhaps, all we could hear is the dropping and plopping of stones to the ground as the men sheepishly let go of the rocks as they walk away. For they knew they had severe sins, just like the woman; only their sins were different.

That scene ends with Jesus alone with the woman. Jesus straightened up and said to her:

John 8:10 “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

John 8:11 She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

It is this beautiful touching, poignant, and courageous portrait of Jesus that has been twisted to become a proof text of judgmentalism to say,

“Tell people to go and sin no more,” when actually it is a story of God’s grace.

Are there times that we need to point out people’s sin? Yes, maybe an intervention for a person overwhelmed by a drug. But it’s a lot fewer times than we may think, and we may not always be the best persons to do it. But more importantly, if we are to tell someone not to sin, then the biblical precedent as seen in this passage, is that it should only be AFTER we have defended that person from being stoned to death.

It makes my heart ache when I see Christians or a church condemn homosexuals for their lifestyle, whether in spoken words or words on a sign. I believe they have no right to criticize anyone that unless they have a long history of protecting and loving them; that they have tried to run interference or to block stones, so to speak, from hitting their bodies; that they had a record of saying “You don’t hurt or criticize them unless you go through me first,” as Jesus was saying in protecting the woman.

Unless we have had a history of protecting them by saying don’t you dare bully a kid because he is gay or she is lesbian, or don’t you dare pick on this person because he or she is different; unless we can say we have given to an AIDS foundation to help people live; or have been with them in the hospital when they were dying; or have walked with them when they were depressed or isolated or hated or misunderstood, then, MAYBE, MAYBE after we have protected them with our bodies and with our hearts and our souls from the stones of unfair criticism or harm, then and maybe then we might be able to say to someone, “Go and sin no more.”

Some are quick, way too quick to say that homosexuality is an abomination. And they say this is

horrible. But let’s be fair and look at all Scripture. While yes, the Bible says that in Leviticus 18 and 20, it ALSO says in Proverbs 16:5: “All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the LORD; be assured, they will not go unpunished.”

So, if we are going to start naming sins, let’s start with OUR sins first, especially our pride that we think we know it all and are better behaved than other people for if we are prideful, we are an abomination.

Before we say, “Oh, that’s not me,” remember that we are a hospital for sinners, not a museum of saints. As sinners we all have pride in us, and we’re working on it in this hospital.

For guiding, counseling any people towards the life Christ calls us to, I am convinced that it is best done privately in a safe environment and not at a public place in a public building like the State Capitol rotunda. And that is why, though I support and respect members who had their own individual conviction to be at a place like the State Capitol and had good reasons for being there, I personally decided not to be there.

To live in grace is no small thing. It means I have to be fully aware of my own shortcomings – how I don’t know everything, how I have blind spots, how in my own life there is no area that sin doesn’t taint or touch, and how I may have good intentions but I can come across judgmental. Grace means realizing our own sinfulness.

To live a life of gratitude and grace means knowing we have been born with certain ailments, challenges, and a bent toward sin, and yet God still blesses us.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:28 if we have looked at someone with lust we have committed adultery in our hearts.

If we judge someone and call someone a fool, Jesus says in Matthew 5:22: “You will be liable to the hell of fire.”

When we ourselves are so messed up, we should, therefore, be really careful on judging others. When we realize we are so messed up, we should be thankful for God’s forgiveness and grace. When we are living in grace, we are so thankful for any stops at the inn of comfort along the path of suffering. We want to help others get to that inn, like the good Samaritan (in Luke 10).

To live in grace means we are grateful for all that comes towards us. To live in grace means to have a Jerry Coffee attitude—that God can always bring good out of bad. To live in grace is to acknowledge that we are sinners and that once we were blind and now we see. To live in grace means, we give people second chances. We try to be understanding even when people are prickly with us. And we block the stones that are thrown at them. We shield them. To live in grace means we try to find common ground.

I tell my staff that every conversation should be a therapeutic conversation where we try to listen to a person with a concern, and then try to address that person’s deepest need rather than be defensive.

We should not try to foist or force our way of thinking on others. It doesn’t work. Maybe it’s our pride at work when we think we can win or get our way. But life is not a win-lose scenario with people. We should always try to find a win-win.

To live in grace, means we do not lord over others our victories.

Speaking of that, a funny thing happened last week.

Last Sunday, my high school classmate Deacon Tom Kyle said to his wife, Sharon, “The hardest thing about my alma mater Stanford University losing in an upset in a football game [last Saturday] to the University of Southern California is that I will have to go to church the next day and face Dan, a USC alumnus, who will most certainly razz me.”

Me, razz Tom? Me who lives a life of grace? Me, razz Tom who always wore his Stanford shirt to church on the Sunday after Stanford beat USC for the last three years? Me razz him? Perish the thought!

The second thing Tom said to his wife, after hearing in my sermon about my bad luck during my recent Greece trip, was, “I hope I never travel with Dan.”

Well, after I preached last Sunday I caught a flight the next day for a Presbytery meeting in California. And who should I be sitting next to me on the plane, the seat right next to me? That’s right; Deacon Tom Kyle.

Which shows how important it is to live a life of grace! And never razz your pastor, or else you play *ultimate bachi*, which is worse than The Hunger Games. God will get you in the end. Sorry, Tom; no rebuttal. I have the pulpit. But I did let you go with me to the Courtesy Red Carpet room both in Honolulu and in Los Angeles, which shows I still bestow grace even on my persecutors. Now, I just need to work on my pride.

Now back to Stephen. Stephen was a man full of grace. He was also a man full of power. But it wasn’t the power to lord over people. It wasn’t political power nor the power of riches. We see in verse 8 that Stephen had the power of love from the Holy Spirit that was seen in great acts of signs and wonders, which is the biblical phrase for miracles. Other than the original

twelve disciples, Stephen was the first believer who had the gift of praying for healing and seeing miraculous results.

This is biblical proof that signs and wonders were never to be restricted to just the Apostles. There are people today who feel that miraculous prayer was only for the Apostles, and that such prayers ENDED with Jesus and the 12.

But if you study the Bible, that is NOT TRUE. Through Stephen and others, the gifts continued. The Holy Spirit is not contained or restricted only to the first century.

You don’t hear people say, “Oh Satan lost his power after the first century.” No, most people think he is quite active today. And yet, some people say the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit was restricted to just Jesus and the Apostles in the first century. His healing power has ended.

No. I am convinced that all of us are to pray for miracles and be expectant of healings. To be like Stephen is to be open to the fact that God is a God of miracles. To be like Stephen is to learn to pray for miracles – resulting in healing, hope, and transformed lives. To be like Stephen is to be willing to be trained in praying for signs and wonders.

Two weeks ago, our church tour group was in the city of Thessaloniki, which our Bible translations say “Thessalonica” based on the famous Latin Codex Vaticanus manuscript from which many of our translations our based. Hence, they made it sound Roman or Latin by saying “Thessalonica,” but it’s really Thessaloniki.

In Thessaloniki is the largest church in all of Greece – St. Demetrius Church. The church was named after St. Demetrius, a fourth-century martyr.

He was a Roman general who became a Christian and took a stand for Christ against Emperor Diocletian and the Roman Army by refusing to kill all the Christians in Thessaloniki. He was killed as a result of that.

The Greek Orthodox Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, is into having relics, the parts of dead saints, in their Cathedral that people can kiss and pray to or with.

Many people believe St. Demetrius Church is a place of miracles. And while we were there, a VIP family came by and just as three of us were about to leave the Cathedral, they carried out St. Demetrius' coffin so that the family could hug and kiss it. For some reason, the Greek Orthodox church saw Demetrius as the patron saint of healing.

While our tour was visiting there, Pam felt a nudge from God that we should pray for healing. So I asked our tour group if anyone would like prayer for healing.

Seven came forward and came to the front pew and the rest of us all laid hands on them and prayed. Some wanted prayers for stiff hands and fingers; others wanted relief from leg pain, pain in the knees or sciatic nerve, while others asked for healing from a cold and stuffy sinuses.

We prayed in faith, and lo and behold all seven miraculously received healing!

I, too, asked for prayers for my sore knee that I injured on July 31. I have a sprained MCL, and I still had stiffness and pain. When people those from our tour group prayed for me, my knee got instantly healed, and it has been fine since then. An injured knee is not something you can will away.

In one sense it is unusual and supernatural, but in another sense it is

super and should be natural. If we know Jesus, why should we not trust Him to help us even in our sickness or the sickness of others?

To be like Stephen means having two other traits. One of them is a courageous and close personal relationship with Jesus.

Here's the scene just before Stephen is killed.

Acts 7:55 But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Acts 7:56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"
Acts 7:55-56

Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, which to me means he was filled with a supernatural courage to be willing to die for his faith. He also actually saw Jesus and referred to Jesus as the Son of Man, the name that Jesus loved to use for Himself. Stephen was close enough to Jesus to know that.

Stephen said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Stephen knew Jesus. He recognized Him. And then Stephen said, "Receive my Spirit," as he was dying.

Seeing Jesus was a good experience for Stephen. It felt like a hug, not a suffocating stranglehold.

When people hear that Jesus is coming, some might want to run and hide, others are mystified (Gee, I wonder what he will be like), and there are those who will say, "Receive My Spirit. I am home. I have fought the good fight. Take Me Jesus."

That is all of our hope when we die—that we really do know our Lord, Savior and friend.

One of the questions for the Small Groups this week is: If you were told that Jesus is in the next room and wants to meet you, how would you feel?

Would you feel fear (I don't know Him, He might be mad at me or He is going to get me)? Curiosity (I wonder what He is like)? Or love (I can't wait to see Him. I am so grateful for what He has done for me)?

Acts 7:59 says, While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

The other trait of Stephen that is good for us to have is the willingness to forgive others. When Stephen was about to die from the stoning, Stephen said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. (*Acts 7:60*)

And when we really know our own sin, we are compelled to forgive others because we know that our sins have been forgiven and so we should do likewise.

Jesus forgave those who put Him to death. When Jesus died, He said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 22:34)

A mark of the mature Christian is being able to forgive those who have hurt us, even if they meant it for our death.

In conclusion, did you catch the dramatic irony in the two stories we talked about? Two stories about stoning: One involved a woman who was indeed guilty of adultery, who, by the law, deserved to be stoned to death. But Jesus, out of love and grace, interferes and protects her, so she is not stoned.

The other story was about Stephen, who did nothing wrong but was stoned to death. The religious people were there but no one defended him or protected him. They threw rocks at him instead. Yet he, with the love of Jesus, asks that his prosecutors, his executioners be given grace and forgiveness.

This is THE amazing grace of the gospel. And this is what is needed to be preached. Stephen, even in his death, forgave. This is what God asks of us – to forgive others and bestow grace – even on those who hate us or on those we don't fully understand us.

We can forgive others when we realize that he who is without sin can throw the first stone. However, no one can throw a stone, not one since we have all sinned. We can forgive because we know God has forgiven us. So who are we not to forgive others?

So may we be like Stephen – full of grace and full of miraculous power, close to Jesus, and one who forgives even his tormentors. May we be like Him and our Lord, Jesus Christ for it is within our reach.

Amen? Amen.

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Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version at fpchkoolau@gmail.com.