

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 20.iv.2008, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14
Holy Communion, ELW - Setting 5

Jesu Juva !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who
was and Who is to come! ✠Amen.

**Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me
will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will
do greater works than these, because I am going
to the Father.**

**I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that
the Father may be glorified in the Son.**

**If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do
it.**

--John 14:12-14

Today I get to preach the sermon I would like to preach on
its proper day, the Feast of Saint Stephen, an immovable
feast that falls always on the day after Christmas. Where,
according to good Puritan custom, Christmas is not
celebrated on Christmas Day, there is little chance for the

Feast of Saint Stephen to be marked by the Church's worship. So, this is like Christmas in April, at least for some.

Saint Stephen, Deacon of the first Church ever, the Church at Jerusalem, had volunteered to be taken out and stoned to death that day. He had prayed that the LORD would strengthen him in his following of Christ, it is safe to assume. He had cared for the widows and orphans, the many poor either of Jerusalem or from the multitudes of the destitute who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem and now had nowhere to go. He had performed that ministry, and now he spoke out, gave witness in public that those who accused Jesus of being a fraud were wrong. He had seen not only the works of God but the *face* of God in the crucified Jesus, now the risen Christ. He understood the Cross and he believed in the Resurrection through God's love. And so,

on that last day and in that last hour of his life on this earth, life as we know it, he did not ask to be spared by a miracle, or excused as mentally incompetent. Instead, he asked the last thing he could, the last things any of us may ask of the One in Whom *we* profess to see the face of God. Stephen the witness, Deacon Stephen the Martyr, asked two things. First, that the Lord Jesus would receive his spirit, and, second—just as Christ Himself had done from the Cross-- that those putting him to death would be forgiven.

Christian martyrs make us nervous. With all Jesus' talk about taking up one's Cross daily to follow Him, it may bother us that some, always a minority of Christians but a minority numbering cumulatively in the millions, actually did that very thing. They did not necessarily go looking for trouble—not that Saint Stephen did, though

some might see it, and dismiss him, in that way—but, when trouble came calling, they did not break and run.

Please note that not every Christian at Jerusalem decided to take the Temple leadership on by giving them an unsolicited sermon on how they had opposed and sanctioned the killing of more than a Prophet of Israel in pushing the Romans to crucify Jesus of Nazareth, successor to the mass-movement spearheaded by his cousin, the late John the Baptist. Not all Jerusalem Christians confronted them, but Deacon Stephen did, because they needed to know that there were those who did not accept their verdict on Jesus as false Messiah, their verdict on His miracle of healing, their verdict on His mercy toward outsiders, their considered opinion on His authority to forgive sins.

Deacon Stephen represented poor people, sick people, widowed and divorced women and little children,

all of whom DID believe that, if there even *is* a God Who loves and Who cares for His children, that God was and still IS in Jesus, Who was humiliated and spat upon, just as happened to them, Jesus Who was scourged and mocked and crucified, just as the high and mighty could do to any one of them at any time and with impunity. Deacon Stephen represented a constituency, and the consensus among that constituency of the poor, the broken and the dispossessed was that God had broken into this world in Jesus, and the He was and *is* the Anointed of God, the Messiah, the Christ. And, for representing that constituency, Stephen had to die. It was as simple as that. If Stephen had been allowed to live and speak another hour of that fateful day, the world would have been turned upside down. It was anyway.

In Christ the heavens had indeed opened up for everyone who heard the Gospel, even if not as dramatically as for Saint Stephen. In everything Jesus did and said, God let it be known that there is room in God's heart and in God's own world for *everyone*, and that no one, not women, not Samaritans, not the mentally or the physically ill, not collaborators with the enemy and not even the enemy himself in the person of a Roman army officer were excluded from discourse, from mercy, from hope. They *all* believed God had made *room* for them, *room* in a world that excluded them, *space* for hope and for peace, just like Stephen as they were tearing the clothes off his back as they dragged him out of the Holy City like garbage to be gotten rid of, as they were dragging him by his hair, dragging him by his beard, as they were picking up stones and small boulders to break his bones knew that there was a

place for him, *room* for him at Jesus side and that he was almost there, happy because he was almost there. And then, at the very last instant, by his prayer which his Savior had already promised to answer in the words we heard in today's Gospel, Stephen made sure that there would be room in the kingdom of God's peace even for his executioners, that they would finally be freed from their rage and fury and know what it is to be loved by God simply because love is Who God is.

In our society as it is and in the Church in our land as the Church is, there are certainly very many who share this vision and who live it, day in and day out. But old patterns and deep ones hold us back from doing the works of our Heavenly Father just as His Son, Our Savior, did those works. There may be room enough for all in the Kingdom of God, but some say *not* in the richest and in one

of the geographically largest countries on the face of the earth. It may be that Jesus did not turn away the sick who were brought to Him, no matter what their nationality, no matter how foul their ailment, but, some might point out, He didn't try to establish a universal health care system for the Roman Empire either. Did He? We shy Lutherans look at all the personal space around us in the pews in our churches from coast to coast and from border to border, and occasionally the thought occurs to us that, maybe we have so many empty places so that we can invite others to fill them. But we are hard put to move out of our comfort zone, whether that is defined by Zip Code or Class Code or Color Code to let those others even know we exist where we do, where we might *not* exist if we fail to do the works of Our Heavenly Father on behalf of *all* our brothers and sisters.

But you know something? Unless I have completely misread today's Gospel, unless I have completely misunderstood the martyrdom of Saint Stephen, unless I have forgotten to pray in my the beautiful Psalm 31 that we *all* prayed with our mouths just moments ago, I believe and can say unequivocally and with absolute conviction, if we pray to do the works of God, even *greater* works than Our Lord did in his ministry of three short years because they will be done here and now, far away and two thousand years hence, we *will* be given the power of the Holy Spirit to do those works and they *will* be done in us, here, in this Congregation and with our sister Congregations. Jesus has made room for us to hope as well. *Seize* that hope and live it to His glory and your everlasting joy! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!