

Acts of the Apostles
Seventh "Think About"
St Philip's United Church of Christ

Reading for the week: Acts 6:8-7:60

OK, OK, you don't have to read it all, but there are two ways to look at the length of the passage for this week's study, which is the story of the martyrdom of Stephen: you could say that it is 68 verses long, and most of it is a sermon (not very encouraging), OR you could say that, in 48 verses (7:2-50) Stephen summarizes the entire story of the Old Testament from the time of Abraham to the time of David. If you know what those 48 verses say, you know almost everything you need to know about the major themes of the Bible that the early Christian community made part of its story.

Of course, the story isn't entirely unbiased. There are things Stephen emphasizes and there are things he leaves out. The story is a response to some people who are questioning Stephen's teachings about Jesus. They are called the Synagogue of Freedmen (perhaps Jews who had been enslaved in different parts of the Roman Empire and had been freed to live in Jerusalem, where they may have become deeply devoted to Temple worship). Stephen recognizes them as fellow members with himself of the Jerusalem Jewish community, but warns them that they, like many who came before them, are rejecting the things God is doing in their midst. When Jacob's sons became jealous of their brother Joseph, he says, they rejected him and sold him into slavery; and when we were enslaved in Egypt some of us rejected the leadership of Moses. God led us safely through the wilderness, and was worshipped in an ordinary tent, but we thought we needed a temple made of stone, so over God's objections, we built one anyway (and have been building them ever since).

When he had told this whole story about how people close their ears to the teachings of God and their eyes to the struggles of God's people, and when he had reminded them that God saves us anyway, Stephen came to his harsh conclusion. You can read it in verses 51-53 (do it now!), but when you do be careful not to think that Stephen's words were only for the people of that synagogue to hear. Religious people of every generation could look back over history and see the way our own parents and foreparents and we ourselves have neglected and abused the teachings of our faith, by rejecting the immigrant and those who are oppressed within our land (see vs. 6-7), by loving our material wealth more than justice (vs. 39-40) and the sanctuaries we build more than the sanctuaries of our hearts (vs. 49).

Stephen became the first Christian martyr. He was stoned by his own community, who reacted in rage because he had insulted their religious pride. He reminded them that religion without justice is not faithful and that worship without compassion is empty of meaning. We don't have to look far to see examples of righteous religious rage today. Don't just look for it in others. Christians do it too. And when we become bloated with righteous anger, we too release our fear in hurtful ways. But Stephen in his dying remembered Jesus: Read his final prayer in verses 59-60.

(This weekly "think about" is printed as an attachment to our Sunday bulletin at St Philip's United Church of Christ, 10708 Lavinia Drive, St Louis, MO 63123. It may also be found on our website. We encourage you to make comments and also to share the page with any one you feel may enjoy seeing it. We are a congregation of the United Church of Christ, a progressive Christian denomination that is committed to inclusive ministry in the spirit of Christ's prayer "that all God's people may be one." Allen M. Fluent, Transitional Pastor)