

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, May 14, 2017
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Honolulu, HI

THE LESSONS

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

THE SERMON: “Try It, You’ll Like It...”

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

When I was reading today’s lesson about Stephen, it triggered a memory about a 1940 movie, “The Fighting 69th,” which I saw in 1946. The plot centers on a misfit soldier, Jerry Plunkett, played by James Cagney. Cagney plays a cocky soldier to cover his cowardice and insecurities. The chaplain, Father Francis P. Duffy, played by Pat O'Brien, attempts to reform Plunkett. Sgt. "Big Mike" Wynn, played by Alan Hale, Sr., loses both of his brothers in action as a result of Plunkett’s blunders and Plunkett is to be court-martialed. As the court martial is being discussed, the Germans begin an attack and Father Duffy leads the soldiers in the Lord’s Prayer as they prepare to return to the trenches. Shamed and inspired by Father Donovan's forbearance and love, Plunkett runs out to the trenches and fights bravely and, when an enemy grenade is thrown into their trench, Plunkett sacrifices his life to protect his comrades by covering the grenade with his body. Thinking about this movie made me recall that passage from John’s gospel, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13). That seems so noble but to tell you the truth I sure don’t want to be a martyr. Even if, as some Muslim terrorists believe, (even if) I were promised 40 virgins in Paradise, with my luck, it would turn out as this one martyr learned. Because when he entered Paradise, he was immediately met by this sloppy, sweaty, overweight guy to whom the martyr asked, “What did you do to become a martyr?” The sloppy guy answered, “Oh, I’m not a martyr. I’m one of your virgins.” That would be my luck...

Acts 7:55-60

I repeat, I don’t want to be a martyr. And, even though one of the Church Fathers, Tertullian, said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church...” If that’s the price, I don’t want to be a seed. But, in our lesson from Acts, I don’t think Stephen wanted to die either. We know the story. Stephen was in the synagogue, debating things with others, like they always did when they gathered but, after he pointed out that time after time the Jews had turned away from God, Stephen said, “You stiff-necked people... you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do... Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.” And, Luke tells us, “When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 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.” When Stephen says that he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God, the crowd gets furious and drags him out of the synagogue to stone him. And, Luke adds, “... the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” And, we know that he changed his name to Paul after he turned

from persecuting Christians to become one himself. But, back to Stephen, as they are stoning him, Stephen says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit....Lord, do not hold this sin against them." After he said this, he died. Stephen knew what Jesus had done for him on the Cross; so, he had to tell others. For that he was killed.

1 Peter 2:2-10

Then, after the stoning of Stephen, the persecution grew against these heretics of the so-called "Way," who claimed Jesus was the messiah and many of them fled to what is now Turkey or, as Peter addressed them in his introduction, "To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." And, I think it's interesting that the scholars chose this lesson to go along with the Acts lesson. In Stephen's death, the stones were used for killing and destroying but Peter used the image of stones for building as he wrote, "Come to him, a living stone... and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." And, Peter points out that we Christians will be a stumbling block to those who disobey God's word; then, he adds, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." In the men's study, they are reading the book, "Follow Me," which says that today's church isn't any longer addressing those who disobey God's word. Instead, he claims that Christians look more like the rest of society and hardly like a chosen race, a royal priesthood, or a holy nation. We no longer act like God's people proclaiming the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. In fact, in his critique of the American church, the author of "Follow Me," Dr. David Platt sounds like the Danish theologian-philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, or like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And, that's pretty much what Peter is challenging his young church with. Basically he's saying, "We Christians shouldn't be like everyone else. Jesus called us to be in this world but not of this world. Christians are called to be distinctive and different through their love and character." That's what he meant when he wrote, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..."

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Well, I don't want to be different or distinctive. My Japanese heritage reminds me that the nail that sticks out should get pounded down. I'm afraid that, if I'm distinctive and different, that people won't like me. I'd rather be like everyone else; so, I'll just live with my guilt and play it safe. But, Jesus didn't think like I do. We remember that Jesus quoted from verse five of today's psalm when he cried out from the Cross, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And, it seems that Stephen remembered Jesus' words when he was dying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." If I really am committed to Christ, then God would be my refuge, not just in words but in actuality. That's what our studies on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and all of our Bible studies seem to be emphasizing. Today more than ever the Church needs to be visible, not just in words but in deed. People are leaving the Church because Christians look and act just like everyone else. Christians argue with each other over politics, over immigration and refugees, over sexuality, over almost everything and there seems to be no dialogue, no conversation, no respect. Christians are no different than Congress, no different than the Tea Party or the liberal, Commie pinkos. Now more than ever, Christians are being called back to the mindset of the psalmist in Psalm 31. "In you, O Lord, I seek refuge... in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me... Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me... Into

your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.” Where do we turn to answer the world’s problems? Homelessness? Let the government do it. Syrian refugees? Let the government do it. Transsexual toilet facilities? Let the government do it. Illegal immigration? Let the government do it. Who is our God? The government. Today’s psalm tells us Christians that should be turning to God for the answers to our problems, not the government. Where is the Church? Our we’re cloistered comfortably in our pews on Sundays when maybe we should be in the world, on the streets, with our neighbors. That’s where Jesus was. And, maybe that’s where we should be.

John 14:1-14

Why does life seem so chaotic today? Jesus spoke to that on the night he was betrayed, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me... In my Father's house there are many dwelling places... I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." And, where did Jesus go? Most of us would answer, "Heaven," but, as John so often does, I think there's a double meaning. Jesus knew that life isn't easy; so, before he went to "heaven," he had to go to the Cross. So, when Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The Cross tells us that Jesus is truly the Word of God. That Word is "forgiveness, mercy, grace, love" all included in Jesus Christ. That's why when he said, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it," it's not a magic formula for us to get whatever we want. Too many Christians haven't memorized, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." When we ask something "in Jesus' name," we should be asking that God may be glorified in the Son, in forgiveness, mercy, grace, and love. We can pray to win the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes or to be cured of cancer but, at the heart, we should be praying that God may be glorified in what we are asking.

The Call and the Challenge

I think everyone knows that the world is a mess. Things are in chaos. Is there any hope? That's what the Church is for. We should be saying, "Don't be afraid! There is hope! We have a future!" People are afraid and uncertain and, like Philip, are asking deep down, "Show us the Father!" And, John said in the first chapter of his gospel, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (1:18). Jesus has made known to us the heart of God. Christ has given you and me the privilege of "making known" God to the world. How can we show others the very heart of God? Is it in being a martyr like Stephen or those Coptic Christians killed in Cairo on Palm Sunday? It could be but I don't think God wants us to die like that. So, how do we make known the "heart of God?" Jesus did that by giving himself for others. He showed us respect, mercy, forgiveness, and love by going to the Cross. You and I can show others respect, mercy, forgiveness. and love by serving others. And, if others are first, maybe you will have died to your "self"....