

Scripture Readings and Sermon

May 10, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Acts 7:55-60 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

After being cautioned by Gamaliel not to make martyrs out of Peter and the other apostles (Acts 5:33-42), the council began to ignore the apostles. It is at this point that a new disciple, Stephen, is chosen by the apostles to serve the needs of the growing church (Acts 6:5). Having been advised not to go after the apostles, the council turns their sights on Stephen and call him in for questioning (6:8-15). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen recounts the history of Israel in the light of its continued disobedience to God ending in the crucifixion of the "Just One" (7:52). To top off this chastisement, Stephen then has a vision of Jesus that Jesus himself had predicted before this same council (Luke 22:69, Mark 14:62, Matthew 26:64). The importance of being at the "right hand" of God was not lost on the council. During biblical times, "Etiquette commands that the most prominent person sit or walk in the center, the next in rank at his right hand, and the third in rank on the left." Scholars state that, "To sit at the right hand of an earthly king was a place of honor, denoting special trust, authority from, and relationship with the king. To sit at the right hand of the King meant that you acted with his authority. Those who came to you would treat you with respect and obedience, as if you were the king yourself." Jesus sitting at the right hand of God would have meant that they crucified the promised Messiah (Psalm 110:1). This vision sealed Stephen's death. A death that witnessed the same prayer of forgiveness Jesus offered. After Stephen's death, the gospel message begins to move beyond Jerusalem.

Commentary on 1 Peter 2:2-10 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

While tradition attributes these letters to Peter, there is mounting evidence by scholars that it was probably written by a disciple of Peter after his death in 64 A.D. If the letter was written after 70 A.D., then the message in this passage is much more significant. While Paul wrote about believers as newborn infants and a new people in the Body of Christ, the image of a new building or temple becomes significant after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Unlike the Temple made of stone which was destroyed, believers are part of a new and living temple founded on Jesus as the cornerstone. With the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer and a new covenant written on their hearts, the faithful are living stones of the new Temple. This new Temple houses a new covenant based on the one "rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight". The sacrifices made at this new Temple are "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" by the priesthood of all believers. This "chosen race" and "holy nation" is not geographical or cultural but is a race and nation of the heart. It is the circumcision of the heart that unites believers as a race and the lordship of Jesus that makes them one nation. All of this is only possible through the merciful grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Commentary on John 14:1-14 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

These are the second and third questions asked after Jesus gave them a "new commandment" in 13:34-35 [Peter (13:37), Thomas (14:5), Philip (14:8), and Judas {not Iscariot} (14:22)]. After answering Peter and telling them that "where I am going you cannot follow", Jesus gives them a word of peace and says that he goes "to prepare a place for you". In the Jewish culture at the time, after the engagement, the groom would build a house for the new couple. The house was only finished when the groom's father approved the house. Thomas, confused by the answer, asks where Jesus is going and how can they get there. Jesus responds with "I am the way, the truth, and the life". This answer was probably even more confusing because the Greek phrase "I am" is the same used for the divine name of God given to Moses. In this answer, Jesus begins to unveil the mystery of the Trinity stating that no

one can get to the Father accept through Jesus the Son. Philip, however, is not sure he will know the Father. At this point Jesus tries to explain the "incarnation". Jesus is not just a person but is the incarnation of God on earth. Since the will of God can not be divided, knowing Jesus is knowing God and knowing God is knowing the Father. If you have seen Jesus then you have seen the Father. This one will would be tested in Gethsemane at which time Jesus could have severed his relationship with God thereby rupturing the incarnation. Because the unity of the will was never diminished, the works of Jesus were the works of the Father.

Sermon "Living into Grace" (*[Sermon Video](#)*)

The traditional approach to developing a sermon is to either pick a overarching theme, a 'golden thread', or to develop a sermon series using the scriptures to support the theme of the series. I have spent the last twenty years using both of these approaches but, during this pandemic when everything is being reconsidered, I am reconsidering these approaches.

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, taught that the studying of scripture and worship were both 'means of grace'. Wesley drew from the various teachings of his time from Roman Catholic to Reformed to develop his understanding of grace. While there is only one grace, grace is experienced differently depending upon where the individual is in the spiritual life. Prevenient grace is the grace that draws the believer from their 'ordinary' life towards a desire for a more spiritual life. Justifying grace is experienced at the intersection of the ordinary and the spiritual. Sanctifying grace is the growing realization that all of life is spiritual.

These experiences of grace calling, forming, and sending are experienced throughout the spiritual journey. No matter how long an individual has walked with God, there are always aspects of their lives that God is calling them away from or reshaping. If the experience of grace shapes the spiritual life, worship is a communal expression of the spiritual life, and scripture as well as worship are means of grace, than it would follow that the scriptures and the sermon should reflect these aspects of grace.

The scriptures for May 10th are good examples of this reflection of grace. The reading for Acts 7:55-60 describing Stephen's martyrdom is not just a powerful witness of Christian forgiveness but a mirror to our own tendency to actively or passively participate in crowd mentality. Recent events have shown how easily people are willing to follow the crowd with the rush on toilet paper being the obvious example. While we may not have participated, how many stood up to say stop this insanity. Whether we admit it in public or not, we have all followed the crowd or kept silent when a word of truth needed to be spoken. It is during times like these that we need God's prevenient grace to call us back and drive us to ask for forgiveness.

When we actively seek forgiveness, we eagerly hear Jesus' words in John 14:1-14, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." No matter how far we may have fallen, Jesus provides us a way back. A way grounded in the truth which may be painful but will lead us to life. This word of justifying grace, that Jesus is not only the way, the truth, and the life but is offering you that way, truth, and life today. In Jesus we have come face to face with the Father and have not been condemned but have been redeemed in Christ. Our guilt is covered and our hearts are healed because Jesus has gone ahead and prepared a way.

This healing offered by Jesus is not given so that we can fall back into our normal routine but so that we can find a new way in Christ. We are made into a new nation and a new priesthood of all believers. As 1 Peter 2:2-10 argues, we are not who we once were but are a new people in Christ. Christ is our cornerstone and we are the living stones of a living house of prayer. Sanctifying grace means that the Holy Spirit is working in each of us to shine forth Christ's light in our lives. We have become living means of grace. And that is what it means to Live into Grace.