

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Signs and Wonders: Acts 6 and 7

Sunday, June 21, 2020 Sermon

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Scripture Reading: Acts 6:1-15

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Today, we are in Acts chapters 6 and 7 of our series on the early church in Acts, which is named Signs and Wonders. These entire two chapters are on Steven. Who is Stephen? Well, William Barclay my favorite theologian says this, "Steven's career was short but very significant". It was short but very significant. In Acts 6:8, we read, "Now Steven, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people". Verse 5 tells us, "He was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit". He had recently been picked to be a deacon of the church. Deacons, much like today in our church, took care of the poor and the widows, and food distribution. He was a godly man who God was working through and a major player in the early church in these two chapters. It makes me think, as far as his role was concerned, there was a home improvement company that used to have a line, "No job too big, no job too small". That was Stephen! No job was too big for him and no job was too small.

In these two chapters, some people did not like Steven. There are two groups of people involved. There's a group called the Freedmen; they were Jewish descendants of men freed from slavery. They probably had their own place of worship and they did not like him. There was another group of people that, broadly speaking, thought they were chosen by God and they were much better than everyone. They also resented Steven. These two groups of people attacked him, but they could not win. In the Bible, in Acts 6:10 it says, "But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke". So, what do you do when you are arguing with somebody and you just can't outsmart him? Well, you either join him or you gossip about him and spread rumors and they chose the latter. In Acts 6, verses 11 and 12, it says they secretly persuaded some men to say that they heard Steven speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. They grabbed him and took him before the Sanhedrin.

The first question is, Have you ever been in a position where you are doing the right thing and yet you are being attacked? Here, Steven *was* doing the right thing, he was "digging" the church, God was working through him and he was being attacked. He was being maliciously attacked. Have *you* ever been there, where you are doing everything right and yet you are being attacked? You can relate to Steven if you've known that. We have to remember the Jewish context of this chapter and of the whole New Testament. You think about the fact that Moses and Abraham were two pillars of your faith, especially the Jewish faith, and so to speak out against Moses would have been horrible, would have been a *huge* thing. So they were really 'bringing out the guns' in accusing him.

Now one main reason why he was accused and brought before this group of Sanhedrin was because he believed that God existed, not just inside the temple but *outside* the temple, as well. It does not surprise us today, but back then you have to understand for the Jewish people and the Jewish religious leaders, that temple was most sacred. For Steven to say, "God is here in the temple, but he also exists outside the temple," that did not sit well with them. In our lives today, though, have we not learned in the last three months, or so, "Yes, God is here at First Pres.? He exists right here. His presence is here in the sanctuary, the Upper Room and all throughout." But He exists right now where you are at, wherever you might be! God exists both inside and outside of church buildings. That's what Steven was saying all those years ago and yet it cost him quite a bit.

Another little nuance about the Sanhedrin, they were kind of the highest Jewish court. They could make rulings on Kings, they could expand boundaries, they were the ones that people would go to, to get a ruling on the law, so they were the highest Jewish court. So they brought Steven before them. It brings us to our first main point, "Tough times still come when you do what is right". *Tough times still come when you do what is right.* I have to be honest with you. Many times I have asked myself, "Why is this happening to me? Why me?" The question is not "Why me?" I have to remind myself the question is "Why *not* me?" Tough times *will* come when you do what is right.

Steven was going to be left with a decision here. As I thought about how to illustrate a decision, I came across a hilarious story and I am going to read it to you now. It was January 6, 2013. Deputies were called to a store in a South Carolina county to investigate a burglary. The deputies determined someone had broken into the store and stolen, and I quote, "Beer, cigarettes, snack foods and energy drinks". Many would

consider those bare essentials, but I digress! The burglar stole about \$160.00 worth of goods, but caused about \$2500 in damages. Now the store manager, his name was Howard Buchholz, but Buck was his nickname, said and I quote, "He knocked out our front door, he knocked out the beer cooler, stole beer, cigarettes, Slim Jims, and in his haste, (catch this!) he made a bad decision. He punctured two or three bags of Cheetos." That was his undoing, the Cheetos! Cheetos have that dusty stuff on them. It's unbelievable. It is everywhere; it gets all over your hands. The Cheeto evidence was all over the parking lot, at the place where he parked his car. It trailed all the way back to his friend's house where he went. Then, there was a bunch of Cheetos on the front door. The police literally said they followed the dust of the Cheetos from the store to this person's house and that's where they arrested him. Bad decision by this gentleman to steal the Cheetos! So that's a pretty funny story about a bad decision made by somebody.

But Steven's decision at the end of chapter 6 verse 7 of Acts is not so funny. It's very serious. The men asked him, "Are these charges true? Are you blaspheming against Abraham? Are you blaspheming against God?" Steven preaches for the next 53 verses. He preaches for the next 53 verses and I can't read all of them but I'll take you through what he says. He starts and talks about Abraham's journey, Abraham, their distant relative, and how God brought them out of slavery. He walks through that story, again, a huge story for the Jewish people. He then talks about Joseph, who was sold into slavery and how he served God in Pharaoh's court. Amazing!

Then he talks about Moses. God spoke to him in the burning bush, remember? He talks about that, then that the people were brought out of Egypt, the plagues, and about the Ten Commandments. He works his way through all these things and, again, we go back to the Jewish tradition, especially Moses and Abraham. They accused Steven of blasphemy against Moses, but against Abraham, it was implied as well. Those two people he connects with, they were such pillars of the faith and he starts connecting the dots between them and the Messiah Jesus. They don't seem to be responding well but then he ends with these following three verses, verses 51 through 53, of Acts, chapter 7.

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

Wow! He doubles down and preaches the tough truth to them, knowing it would cost him quite a bit. Here is a key point we can take from that whole section I just talked about: Steven knew what he believed. *Steven knew what he believed.* I go one step further; he lived it out. It begs the question for us today. If the main point is, Steven knew what he believed, do you and I really know what we believe? And the secondary question is, do we live it out? *Do we live out what we believe?*

The story takes an abrupt turn here. It says in scripture that they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. Then this moment happens; it's just unbelievable. Steven looks up and he can see the glory of God. God allows him to see the word of God and Jesus at the right hand of the Father! Steven tells the people exactly what God has

allowed him to see, and the people--they lose it. The Sanhedrin, the religious leaders there, are so angry because now he is saying, "I see the Messiah at the right hand of God". They lose it and they drag him out of the city and begin to stone him.

You have probably heard of stoning mentioned if you have been to church ever. What does it really mean? The criminal was taken to a really high height and was thrown down viciously. If the fall did not kill him, I learned that the giant boulders and stones thrown at him would. These weren't little rocks; there were huge boulders that were thrown at him.

Our third key point, Life doesn't always make sense from our perspective. *Life doesn't always make sense from our perspective.* In the Disney ending of this story you would see that people are confronted with the truth by Steven and they repent, and they thank him for coming to them with the hard truth. They lift him upon their shoulders, and they repent and come back and accept Jesus as Messiah, the long awaited one. This isn't Disney!

So the mob continues the stoning process. I'm almost done here but I'm reflecting on my notes. You know, if someone was killing me or someone was really hurting me, my first instinct is to get back at them. You may think less of me, but honestly, I would hold a grudge. I would be angry if they were doing severe damage to me or my family. Boy, I don't respond real well!

One of his last actions on earth--what does Steven do, as this is happening to him, as he's been thrown down? Imagine being there. Imagine having stones thrown, knowing your life is going to end for preaching God's word and staying faithful to God. It's about to happen. What does he respond with? He prays for those who are hurting him, for those who are killing him. He prays for them! This reminds me of someone else in scripture, the Messiah himself. That is not my first response when someone is hurting me. But it leads us to a key point, our last key point, of the message: Stephen responded to his enemies with love and prayer. *Stephen responded to his enemies with love and prayer.*

Who are my enemies? Who are your enemies? Maybe you do not have enemies, but maybe people who persecute you or hurt you. Here's the question: How do you respond to them? Steven illustrated to us the right way. He showed love and prayed for those who were not just hurting him, not just persecuting him, but *killing* him.

Four key points:

Tough times still come when you do what is right. We can learn that from Steven. We can also learn that Steven knew what he believed. The third key point is, hey, life isn't always going to make sense from our perspective, and it doesn't have to. We are not promised that. And the fourth one is that Steven responded to enemies with love and prayer.

We can also learn from theologian William Barkley, quoted at the beginning of this message. Steven's life was short but very meaningful. We can learn a lot from this faithful disciple, the first martyr of the early church 2000 years ago. Those main points we can take away from his life, for his testimony applies to us today in 2020.

Amen and thanks be to God.