

First Baptist Church of Fitchburg

1400 John Fitch Highway Fitchburg, MA 01420 Phone# 978-345-5622

October 18th, 2020, 20th Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor: Rev. Meredith H. Christian Musician: Marilyn Carter Song Leader: May Goff



Welcome and Announcements:

Good morning Congregation. Good morning on this beautiful Fall day. I pray you have the chance to enjoy it, and rejoice in the Lord today. I look forward to seeing some of you and am praying for those remaining home. You are most welcome to share your concerns and celebrations with me or your deacons, who will forward them to myself directly if desired. My email is meredithhchristian@gmail.com and phone is (774) 276-0505.

Call to Worship: (in unison)

In You, Lord, we live and move and have our being. From You we have come, and to You we will return. To You we owe everything we are and everything we have. Therefore to You we owe worship and praise, which we gladly offer during this time set aside for You Almighty God. Amen.

Invocation:

Father, we come to you in the name of Jesus, asking for forgiveness and protection. We repent for any and every manifestation of haughtiness, pride, stubbornness, stiff-necked postures, and the like. Forgive us for allowing any corrupt communication to come out of our mouths... and help us to crucify our own desires to be defensive when convicted by our own wrong doing so that our carnal nature will not rise up and lead us. Help us to be led by Your Spirit and Your Spirit alone so that we do not fall into the traps of the enemy of judging, criticizing, complaining or attacking others or fleeing when things get difficult (*Leclaire, 92-3*), for we as for Your strength, wisdom and courage to speak and do Your will, in that name of Your Son Jesus, Amen.

Gloria Patri:

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be
world without end. Amen, Amen.*

Hymn: *"He's Got the Whole World in His Hands"* # 80 (Click on link) <https://youtu.be/yHZUMt2Zk1I>

First Reading: *Psalm 31:1-5*

"In You, Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in Your righteousness. Turn Your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me. Since You are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of Your Name lead and guide me. Keep me free from the trap that is set for me, for You are my refuge. Into Your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God."

Celebrations and Concerns:

Prayers for the passing of family members, our own physical and mental infirmities, and the health and well being of others.

Prayers for peace and patience in our families, neighborhoods, state and nation and prayers for all leaders and all seeking leadership positions as nominees in this country, along with their families.

Silent Prayer: Let us take a silent moment before the Lord.

Pastoral Prayer of Intercession for our Nation:

We pray today for our government and our land. We are grateful for a land that is free and for a government that, despite its faults, is one of the fairest in the entire world.

We pray for the strength of our nation and for its ability to defend itself against those who want to destroy our way of life. We are grateful for those who have made the supreme sacrifice on or behalf and for those who at this moment are prepared to defend their country.

We pray for the moral and spiritual strength of our nation, knowing that our greatest asset is the personal strength of our people- our honesty, our integrity, our willingness to do the right thing. We pray that more and more as a nation we will emphasize the human values that really count, such as peace, justice, reverence for life, and equal opportunity for all, even as we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray,

***Our Father**, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

Children's Message: (Offered by Debi Cross)

The Pumpkin

Once there was a Gardner who planted pumpkin seeds in His garden. Each day the Gardner cared for the seeds. He watered them, pulled weeds from around them, and sheltered them from the heat of the sun. The seeds grew into seedlings, which developed into plants, until one day, they produced fruit - pumpkins! The pleased Gardner looked out at His garden and said, "It is good!"

One day, the Gardner went out into his field and picked a special pumpkin. It was a bit dirty from laying in the garden, so he brought it inside and gently wiped it off. Now the pumpkin looked clean on the outside, but what about the inside?

The Gardner took a knife and cut open the top of the pumpkin. And what did he find? A bunch of slimy, yucky goo! The Gardner wanted his special pumpkin to be beautiful, so He carefully scraped out all of the goo inside until the pumpkin was as clean inside as it was outside!

But the Gardner still wasn't satisfied with the pumpkin. He decided it needed a face! So, He carefully cut out two eyes, a nose, and a big smiling mouth. Now the Gardner's special pumpkin looked clean AND happy.

But the Gardner still wasn't satisfied with the pumpkin. So, He put a light inside it. The pumpkin glowed so beautifully! The Gardner's special project was complete.

When friend and neighbors saw the Gardner's special pumpkin, they marveled at how He took something ordinary from His garden, cleaned it inside and out, put His light inside, and made it something extraordinary!

We are like the pumpkins and God is the Gardner. God creates us and cares for us, but inside we all have the yucky goo - which is sin.

Just like the Gardner cleaned out his pumpkin's goo, God wants to clean out all our sin, too. So He sent his son Jesus to die for our sins, to take the punishment we deserved.

Just like the Gardner gave the pumpkin a new face, God makes us a new creation! And just like the Gardner put His light into the pumpkin to make it shine, so God gives us his light to shine through us!

So, when we let God clean out our sin, by believing that Jesus died to pay the punishment that we deserve, He turns us into new creations that can shine for Him! And when others see our light, then they might want to learn how to have a light of their own too! AMEN

***Blessing of the Tithes, Offerings and Gifts:**

As caretakers of God's world, let us be faithful in our responsibilities. We give these tithes, offerings and gifts with a pledge to be responsible stewards-carefully using some and giving unto others from that which is given. May that which we have offered be given and received with joy, in love.

(Tithes, offerings, and gifts are greatly appreciated as a means to continue to care for our facilities, the needs of each other, and our local and worldwide community. We thank you for your pledges at this time and ask that you **Please Pray over your gifts** and mail them to the church at **1400 John Fitch Hwy, Fitchburg MA 01420**).

Doxology:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow

Praise Him all creatures here below

Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts

Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost.

Sermon Text: *Acts 7:51-60*

““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.”

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, *being filled with the Holy Spirit*, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep”

“Stephen’s story. Part 2: Throwing Stones”

Some of you may recall that we started this journey with the Deacon Stephen some time ago. I have not read the full argument of the Spirit of God through Stephen to the Pharisees and Sadducees found in *Acts 7:2-50*, though it is absolutely worth the read as a whole and we have covered much of what he had to say, because what he said was nothing short of the truth, and truth, once heard puts the listener in a place of responsibility to react. It is the reaction that defines the character of the listener and determines their future actions.

The issue that brought about Stephen’s death was never whether or not he was telling the truth, but instead how those listening dealt with what they heard and knew to be true. Truth, when heard and acknowledged must be addressed. Even truths we don’t like. The question is, do we receive it and allow it to change and correct us, or do we try to remove it so that we can go on in the wrong direction without thinking about its repercussions?

Stephen was brought before the governing rulers for Christ’s sake, and when they delivered him up, he took no thought for how or what he spoke, for the Holy Spirit gave him that same hour what he should speak, so it was not him that spoke, but the Spirit of God within him (*Matthew 10:18-20*), just as, years earlier, the twelve Apostles were given utterance when Jesus sent them forth through the towns to preform healings, miracles and deliverance to the Jewish people.

We do not know whether or not Stephen was saved, or living in Judea when our Lord said to His disciples that there would surely arise divisions within households and families for His sake in *Matthew 10:34-40*, yet Stephen, none the less, seemed comforted by the reflection that the negative reaction in people to the Gospel of Christ was not a rejection of the speaker necessarily, but rather of His teachings.

So these men at the synagogue became enraged not by Stephen himself, for he was an observant man from a gentile region helping to feed the Jewish widows and orphans in his neighborhood, as we learned in earlier weeks (*Acts 6:1-5*). Stephen was not objectionable, rather, it was his convicting message which they found so contemptible.

Don't you just hate it when someone calls you out, and worse, they are right? I recall a long ago Sunday when the church gathered in their fellowship hall after services, and I was standing just about in the middle of the room when my own mother stepped back, looked at me and said loudly, just when there seemed to be a din in the general conversation in the room, "That is a horrible dress and you look terrible in it!".

I pointed out that it was her sister's dress and I was wearing it in honor of her as she had just passed on to be with the Lord. Well my mother doubled down with the response, "I know, and I didn't like it on her and I don't like it on you". The point being that Stephen was in the right, but I cannot help but feel sympathetic to the fact that perhaps there may have been a better way to correct the religious leaders than to call them out right there at the Temple.

The ones being rebuked did not take the criticism as well as I did, and this did seem to be God's will, after all those men may have dragged him before the court, but it was God Almighty who led him there to speak before them and convict them of their wickedness. It says in *Acts 6:15* that Stephen's face looked to his accusers as the "face of an angel" (*Acts 6:15*).

This was the same word used by Stephen when he accused them of having been given the laws by decree given by angels but they did not receive it (*Acts 7:53*). The word is ἄγγελος (angelos), meaning one sent, messenger or angel. Stephen was that messenger sent to confront their wickedness that they might repent and be saved from the rath to come.

Do you see the pattern which your Bible presents to you? This trial could have been an act of God's mercy upon the leadership of Judea. Let us look at the history and patterns that the Lord has given us in His Word.

The king Josiah, when he heard the Book of the Law proclaimed by Moses, rent his garments in guilt and shame, made amends by removing all the wickedness he found in the region and then proclaimed the Passover, quarantining all and proclaiming the Word of God to the children of Israel, which caused the people to fall on their knees in repentance and vow to return to the Lord (*2 Kings 22-23*). This king had a heart for God that, for a time, brought about true repentance.

The prophet Jonah, who was charged with proclaiming destruction to a wicked Gentile nation, in refusing to go and deliver the message from God, was held in the belly of a fish before being spewed out to go and proclaim destruction to Nineveh, a city named after the fish goddess they worshiped. It was a vast and powerful city, having "reached its zenith toward the end of the eighth century B.C., when it was in effect reconstructed during the reign of Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.) and became the capital of the Assyrian empire." (*AICE*).

All those people, from the King to the lowest of commoners, upon hearing the truth of their sins were convicted, repented and were given a stay of destruction for another generation or two as a result before, "Nineveh was captured, plundered, and destroyed in the summer of 612 B.C. by the forces of the Median and Babylonian empires, and became a desolate heap" (*AICE*). Punishment for sin would come, but in His mercy, God had acknowledged their repentance and granted them a reprieve.

Once again God sent a man to proclaim the truth to the children of Israel, which might have convicted them, but instead, they refused to repent and in the face of conviction, they sought to remove the Word from their camp and destroy the messenger rather than change their ways, just as their forefathers had done with Zechariah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, whom Stephen here quoted.

Those listening became so enraged by what he said that they, “ground their teeth at Stephen”. Scripture mentions this term elsewhere. King David, in the Psalms wrote about his enemies, wicked men gnashing their teeth at him as they mocked and plotted against him (*Psalms 35:16, 37:12 & 112:10*), and Job once accused God of gnashing His teeth at him in anger (*Job 16:9*), as a reasoning for his tremendous sufferings.

Later, in the Gospel of *Matthew*, Jesus talked about hypocrites and worthless servants being cast outside of God’s grace, into a place of darkness, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (*Matthew 8:12, 13:42 & 50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30*), 6 times, each time referring to a place that we call Hell. What is meant by this phrase is that those listening to Stephen, rather than experience convictions for those things they had done as a people to the messengers of God, they were instead filled with blind rage, and blind passion to see Stephen stopped at all costs.

This group of respectable men turned into an angry mob who covered their ears against what Stephen was saying as, “Their guilt stung them to the heart, and they sought relief in murdering their reprover, instead of sorrow and supplication for mercy” (*Henry, 383*). They were convicted, and in their conviction, instead of repentance, they evoked rage and tried to remove their source of discomfort. Stephen was killed because of his words, because he said that the prophets had been wrongly murdered for speaking the Word of God to the people.

The Pharisees thought that what they were doing was right, good and lawful, even though when they were confronted with Jesus, they had to wait for a verdict from Rome. Remember the rule in *John 18:31* that only Rome may execute a person? This time they went right for the sentencing by dragging Stephen out of the city and didn’t even look for a cliff over which to toss him, they just started throwing stone after stone, until their fury abated.

So ended the ministry of Stephen, a man of God. Before his murder, “Stephen had taken great care in establishing the pattern of Israel’s history. The pendulum of their behavior swung from worship in obedience and acceptance to denial in rebellion and rejection” (*PCF, 197*). Once again the leadership in Israel rejected the Word of God given through one of His messengers.

Notice the pattern here people. God had said repeatedly in the past that as they killed His prophets, He would lift His hand and turn from them. God is not like us, beloved, He always means what He says. I ask you to recall that what Egypt agreed with through Pharaoh determined their outcome. What Nineveh agreed with determined their future. What Israel agreed with would do the same, “For God does not show favoritism” (*Romans 2:11*), with regard to the law.

This account is a message to all generations that what we agree with and lift up through our governments will determine our future as a nation, just as surely as the mob’s rejection of Stephen’s correction sealed their city, and governments pending destruction. As the leadership stoned Stephen, so they sealed their future and assured that the stones would topple on the Temple and government in Jerusalem. They had spent 46 years of building, and completed the Temple in 34AD –6 years later Jewish rebellion led to the destruction of the city in 70AD when, “Not a stone *was* left upon another” (*Matthew 24:2*).

Much later, what Rome agreed with would seal their own destruction. And I tell you all this to say that here too, what America agrees with will determine our future as a nation. I assure you, in this next election, we will get the government we deserve. The one we agree with, and whatever that looks like, will determine our future in America and God’s position over this land of His, to which we have been entrusted to steward.

It is not my desire to be overtly political. I am not trying to push or sway any of you in a particular direction. As a patriot myself, it is my deeply held conviction that each of you pray and vote as the Lord and your conscience leads you without interference. I am not trying to get myself fired, but I am trying to ignite the fire of God in you. The commentator Ajith Fernando wrote,

“Christians often want to be comfortable; thus, they resisted change. Christianity, however, can never coexist with comfort. ...Biblical Christians must always be open to change because they know how far they are from the ideals of God. We must be open to self-criticism and remember that this self-criticism will often come through people who have discovered something from the Word that the rest of us had neglected. May we welcome such prophets, rather than persecute them. And may we humbly open ourselves to correction” (*Fernando, 257-258*).

In light of the stoning of Stephen, I feel it appropriate to ask you these few questions, and truly hope that you will pray about them over the next few days. Search your heart and seek God’s council for your own sake, and for the sake of those who encounter you.

Is it possible that you have become stiff-necked, or stubborn in your own opinions? Being determined and “sticking to your guns” can be a good thing, but only when your determination is to stick with the Word of God, so I pray that you pray about whether your feet are stuck in a shifty position so much so that you refuse to move or standing firm on the Rock, which is Jesus?

Are you uncircumcised of heart and ears, or are you willing to listen before forming an argument? Listening without trying to shift what you hear into the agenda you have decided upon is so important. Listening for the Holy Spirit to speak to you on a matter is even more so, so please, even if you oppose the person you are listening to, try not to oppose God’s Spirit.

Whose side are you on? What is your response to conviction? Will you repent or kill the messenger so that you do not have to stop and deal with what God is showing you, or turn in a different directions and look a fool before your friends and relatives, maybe loose some friends or the company of relatives for having allowed yourself to be “recalibrated”?

Open your heart and your spiritual ears to hear what the Lord is saying. Ask God where you are right now and in what areas you may need adjustment. Take time to put this message down and get quiet with the Lord as you ingest these questions as they pertain to your life and belief systems. God says that “all men have fallen short of the glory of God” “There are none good, not one”. Ask the One who is perfect and holy and blameless. Ask the Lamb of God to correct your course.

Lastly, ask yourself if you may be behaving “Just like your ancestors” in your responses to stimuli or are you responding more like your Heavenly Father, in love, respect and dignity for the one speaking before you? You may not like what another person is saying, but you can choose to kindly disagree and respond in love for the person before you as an equally divinely and uniquely created child of God, even if they are factually or morally incorrect with His Word.

After all, this is not about “them”. It is about you and how you respond to others. You cannot control all that others say or do, or how they will respond to what you say or do, but you have a responsibility to exhibit self-control in your responses. You can choose to respond to the needs of others. You can even choose to walk away and leave them to their opinions.

As a matter of detail, I feel I would be remiss if I did not point out that the very next verse brings into full view, in a very unflattering way, the man called Saul.

“This account has all of the elements of a Hollywood classic where a hero-figure is the object of injustice and evil. Waiting in the wings stands another protagonist who, unknowingly or even reluctantly, is about to bring redemption to the story. Saul is such a figure. Saul witnesses the price that Stephen paid for his conviction, yet the next chapter begins with these chilling words, “And Saul approved of their killing him” (*Kindley*).

In fact the *Jerusalem Bible* says, “Saul entirely approved of the killing” (*Jerusalem Bible*). Saul was right there. He was wicked, he supported the murder of Stephen and went right out to look for more like him to kill and destroy in the name of God. To me, this shows that no matter how far off any of us find ourselves today, it is still not too late. We still have a moment in time left to stop and change the course of our lives. Saul had to fall on his backside and be blinded to everything he saw in order for him to finally submit to seeing things in the light of God’s love.

If even now, as we read of Saul’s having been so passionate for wickedness, fully overcome by his religious spirit, God turned that passion for His own glory and the good of millions and millions from that time to this moment.

What do you think that God is willing to do for you? If you would just follow up on that commitment to lay down your lives and take up the cross, what would God do with your time, your mouth, your homes and neighborhoods through you?

Would your lives produce fruit or poison if you continue to pursue your own desires, thoughts and opinions? Would it continue to drag others into condemnation, oppression or destruction or would you be fruit bearers of peace, forbearance, kindness and the like (*Galatians 5:22-23*)? Jesus forgave, and so how do any of us have a right to withhold forgiveness, even as we are called to hold others to justice for their actions, we can release them over to God in our hearts and chose to reserve vengeance to the Lord alone, as He sees fit.

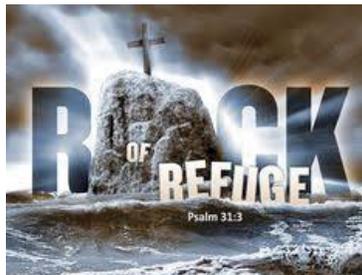
Will you commit your spirit into the hands of the Lord (*Psalms 31:5, Acts 7:59*)? I pray you do. I pray that you pray. I pray that the Lord speak to you, whether He approaches you gently, in comfort, encouraging you to hold fast to your faith and hold on as He delivers you or God knocks you on your back side, shows you how wrong you are and tells you to cut it out. May the Lord convict you this week.

Hymn: “*We Believe in God Almighty*” # 673 (Click on link) <https://youtu.be/IL36Zi3-ft4>

Benediction:

May we continue to boldly give in service, grow in grace and go out and spread the Gospel in peace, in the name of Jesus, through the power of His Spirit, to the glory of God. Amen.

May the Lord bless and keep you all.



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