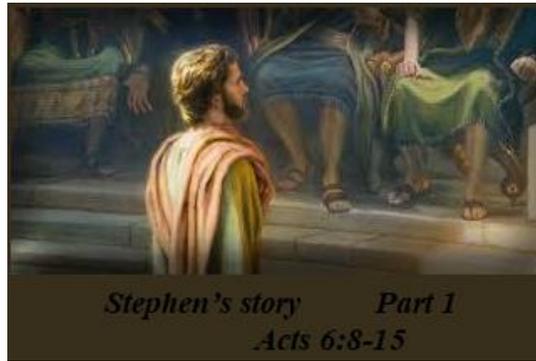


First Baptist Church of Fitchburg

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

August 2nd, 2020, 9th Sunday after Pentecost, Communion Sunday

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



Welcome and Announcements:

Good morning Congregation, I pray you are all well and finding ways to fill your days with words and thoughts of hope and peace. Next week you will be joined by my dear friend and colleague, Pastor Marquis Lockhart during the Sunday service. I am confident that he will receive a warm welcome and be assisted in navigating the way we worship here in Fitchburg, as each missionary, pastor, or guest we have had join us has reported that they found a comfortable seat among our congregation. He will be leading worship for the next two weeks!

I will be returning for Sunday service on August 23rd, yet am available by phone, email. 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)

Come, you who are weary, and find rest.
Come, you who are ill and find healing.
Come, you who are confused, and find confidence.
Come, you who are guilty, and find pardon.

Invocation:

We rely on You, Gracious God, for all things necessary for body and soul. As the five thousand received from Jesus both spiritual and physical food, so we anticipate that today we will receive nourishment from Him who called Himself the Bread of Life, Christ, 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: *“Trust and Obey” # 443* (Click on link. Skip Ad->) <https://youtu.be/R0S8Z-dMM40>

First Reading: *Psalm 109:1-5, 26-31*

“My God, whom I praise, do not remain silent, for people who are wicked and deceitful have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues. With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause. In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer. They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship.

Help me, LORD my God; save me according to your unfailing love. Let them know that it is your hand, that you, LORD, have done it. While they curse, may you bless; may those who attack me be put to shame, but may your servant rejoice. May my accusers be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as in a cloak. With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD; in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him. For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save their lives from those who would condemn them.”

Celebrations and Concerns:

Celebration for Atera's successful procedure. Continued prayers for members of our congregation who struggle with health situations. Praise for answered prayers.

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

~Pastoral Prayer:

During this time of year when many of our number typically take a vacation, we raise our prayers for those who are taking this opportunity for refreshment and renewal, even from their homes. We pray for physical safety, because we live in a world fraught with danger on the road, in the water, and in the air. We pray for good humor and patience, because we know that this is a time of tension as well as a season of enjoyment.

We pray for a renewed awareness of the beauty of the earth and a new appreciation of the wonders of creation. May we have a new understanding of the people of our world, for many of us will come into contact with different cultures, lifestyles, and health practice choices based on their individual situations. We pray for a revival of spirit, a regeneration of energy, a relaxation of nerves, a covering of health and a renewal of our relationship with You, 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)

Savior's Happy Meal

Have you ever had a McDonald's Happy Meal? What's your favorite part of a Happy Meal? For most children, their favorite part of the Happy Meal is the toy.

I will have to be honest with you, I'm not too happy about the toy in Happy Meals. They look pretty cheap and I doubt that it will last very long. Even if it does last, it doesn't do much of anything and I'm sure it won't keep me happy for very long. I will admit that I was pretty happy about the fries, but as good as they were, when they were gone, I wasn't really satisfied. I still wanted more. That's the trouble with a McDonald's Happy Meal -- the happiness just doesn't last.

Did you know that our church has a happy meal? Well, we do -- and we are going to have a happy meal right here in this worship service this morning. This is what our happy meal looks like. It is a small piece of bread and a little glass of juice.

The bread represents the body of Jesus and the juice represents his blood. When we eat this Happy Meal, we are reminded that Jesus loved us so much that he died on the cross so that you and I could have everlasting life in heaven with him. Now, that is something to be happy about!

I have a poem that might help you to remember the meaning of our Happy Meal.

The Savior's Happy Meal
This Happy Meal doesn't look like much,
And it doesn't come with a toy.
It may not fill my stomach,
But it fills my heart with joy!
The bread and juice remind me of
The Savior's love for me;
When he died upon a rugged cross
On a hill called Calvary.
There is no way I can describe
The gratitude I feel
Each and every time I eat
The Savior's Happy Meal!

Prayer: Thank you, Heavenly Father, for Jesus' death and resurrection. Thank you also for the Happy Meal we will eat today as a reminder of what Jesus has done for us. Amen.

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

As Christ fed the five thousand, let us present our offerings so people around the world can share the Bread of Life. As Christ had compassion on the multitude because they had no food, so we give because we have compassion on those who need food for the body and food for the soul. Amen.

(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 6:8-15*

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 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. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

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

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

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

“Stephen’s story. Part 1: Facing Persecution”

We have been slowly moving through the book of Acts over the past few months, and I find it personally fitting that we should now be speaking of the disciple Stephen. As you may recall from last week, Stephen was the first one chosen to take on the role of deacon, having been found within his peer group to be a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He, and 6 others were given the task of faithfully stewarding much needed provisions among the Hellenistic Jews (*Acts 6:3-5*). It was not long after Stephen went out of Judea, in order to fulfill that role, when he found himself facing persecution from his own kind, who were far less than kind or helpful toward him, despite, or perhaps because of the wonders and miracles that the Lord performed through him on behalf of the people (*Acts 6:8*).

The Bible says that Stephen was a good deacon. He was doing the right thing through the guidance of the Holy Spirit within him, yet for some reason his work in feeding and caring for the widowed, poor, and needy became a source of irritation for people belonging to the “Freedman synagogue”; men from the Greek speaking area he was called to serve. These Freeman were from Cyrene (Libya) and Alexandria (Egypt), which were rather wealthy port cities within the Roman empire. They openly disputed Stephen’s theology and teachings.

The other cities mentioned as being within Freedman territory were in Asia minor, near Ephesus, which happened to be the birthplace of Saul of Tarsus, a town located within Cilicia. These “Freedmen” were former slaves, or descendants of former slaves who had been spread out during the Diaspora, or great dispersion of Jewish people from the land of Israel hundreds of years earlier when the city of Jerusalem was sacked by invading enemies. They were Jews with something to prove.

Stephen, himself was a Greek speaking Jew. These were his people, even so they started to argue with Stephen and each time he would finish those arguments, for there was no match for the Spirit of wisdom within him, just as Jesus had promised when He assured His followers that when they would be brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, they should not worry about how they would defend themselves or what they will say, for the Holy Spirit would teach them at that time what they should say (*Luke 12:11-12*). Each time that the Freedman disputed Stephen, the Spirit gave him words and wisdom that none of his adversaries were able to resist or contradict (*Luke 21:15*).

I wonder, why were the men from the Freedmen synagogue so upset with Stephen? Was it because he was fairly distributing items to the needy in their neighborhood, or because of his intelligence? Or was it that the community was no longer depending on the institution of the synagogue and were now instead shifting and finding what sustenance and solace in the Word, will and provision of God through His servant Stephen?

The synagogues had been the place that Jewish people had relied on for education, justice, and their personal needs for quite a long time. They took care of their own. It can be difficult for some people to loosen a grip that they have held in place for a long time and allow the light of the Living God to shine through into a situation. Whatever the cause, those men could not beat him with the tongue, so they tried beating him with underhanded tactics. Rather than the Freedmen using their monetary resources meet the needs of the needy, they used them to bribe people to lie about Stephen as a way of removing him and his teachings from their presence.

Those who lied claimed that Stephen had been speaking blasphemy against Moses and even against God (*v.11*). In their eyes, picking on Moses was like attacking God Himself, and once they started to spin tales against him, they just kept talking. Those that had been bribed went around spreading gossip about Stephen until they gained momentum. The accusations were spread often enough, and by just enough people, that the gossip reached the ears of the elders and teachers, who eventually had him taken in for questioning before the Sanhedrin (*v.12*).

So Stephen was brought before the Jewish council at the Temple; the epicenter of Jewish life. Once there the false witnesses continued to lie before the council about Stephen's having committed the same sins and crimes that this council had previously charged to Jesus. The Sanhedrin was the highest court in the Jewish world, the same one who convicted Jesus, Peter, and John. The most condemning accusation of blasphemy against the young deacon came in the form of an attack on the Temple itself.

This should be a warning to Christians, as we read this to be very careful of "always" and "never" extreme language and speeches. The liars said that Stephen was always saying that the same Jesus of Nazareth, whom the council had condemned, would destroy the Temple, and change the very laws of Moses handed down from God on Mount Sinai (*Exodus 19-20*). They continued to twist Stephen's words until they could wrap them around his neck. Did they hear Stephen talk about how He would, "destroy this temple and then raise it again in three days" (*John 2:19*)? We know from Scripture that Jesus was talking about his own body (*John 2:21*).

As the Sanhedrin understood what was being said, if the actual Temple were destroyed, was he threatening to destroy the system in Judea? Where would they sacrifice and perform the acts set down by Moses without the Temple? Did they care about what God was saying to His people, or protecting the system they had in place that had secured their livelihood for nearly a millennia? *Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21* each talk about Jesus saying the Temple would be destroyed, and indeed it was destroyed by Romans under the command of Titus in 70^{AD}. With the destruction of the Temple, went the destruction of the system and disbursement of the Jewish people.

Yet God has shown over the past nearly 2000 years, that the people were more than their building. The temple of God is indeed within each person and the act of worship continues anywhere that two or more gather in His name (*Matthew 18:20*). After Jerusalem was destroyed, the sacrifices of animals were stopped for the Jewish people. It was no longer necessary. And why not? Would God keep in place something that He had decided it was time to let go? Jesus is our Passover Lamb (*I Corinthians 5:7*). our Perfect Sacrifice (*Hebrews 10:14*).

There is now no more need for the blood of bulls and goats. They were going to have to let that go, and sometimes the only way someone can let go of what they have been doing for a long time and holding on to so tightly is for Someone stronger, with more authority and control to take it from their grasp for their own good. Perhaps this is what was occurring in the shift that was taking place just then in the reliance of the people in the servants of the Temple and synagogues. The words of the council were seen as having God's unquestioning authority, yet the decisions of the council were becoming more the will of Caesar than the will of God.

In any case, in the face of persecution, the text says that Stephen's face was as that of an angel (v. 15). It was the face of a person who had been in the presence of God, just as Moses' face had once glowed after spending time in the presence of God on Mount Sinai (*Exodus 34:29-30*). Stephen appeared as innocent as an Angel before the council with no trace of guilt on his face.

In the end God, "used this persecution to spread the Gospel beyond the boundaries of Judea to the ends of the world. In a twist of irony, God used the Greek-speaking Jews to provide the impetus that drove the Gospel to the Greek-speaking world" (*PCF, 154*), through the attack on Stephen and the Gospel that he shared. This first Martyrdom would split Judaism and Christianity in two as distinctively different belief systems. It launched the ministries of both Peter and Paul. The world would never be the same.

Here in this morning's passages is a warning against institutionalism that I find most relevant today. I ask myself, as a faithful Christian and Church goer, if my dedication is toward the Savior or the system that has intrinsically created itself and wrapped around the faith in order to support Christian methods of worship and service in modern society. Another warning that I see in this text is against using extreme, dramatic language, that excludes the possibility of hope or change, such as "always, never, forever", unless such a word is truly fitting. It never wins an argument and usually creates tension and division by exacerbating the amount of an action to seem as though there is no end to it.

This scripture is also a lesson in letting go and letting God. Too often humans try to help God out of what they think may be a tricky spot for the Almighty. They believe that the old wise phrase of Benjamin Franklin, "God helps those who help themselves" (Franklin), is an actual passage in the Bible and worse, a mandate from God, as if He is saying that He will only help people if they already do most of the work on their own. Now that borders on blasphemy. God's Aseity, His independence is made clear in *Genesis 1:1* & *John 1:3*. He is truly God all by Himself, in 3 persons, and requires nothing from humanity. It is precisely because He is all in all that in Him alone can we put our trust (*Psalms 31:1*).

The truth is, what we ought to say is, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that" (*James 4:15*). God does not require us, He desires a relationship with us. He is our Creator and perfectly, "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (*Ephesians 3:20*). When we stop holding on to things, He can fill our open hands with work and good things for our benefit and the benefit of others, out of His love and mercy, not out of reaction to our deeds or in obligation to anything or anyone.

This is something that Stephen seemed to understand. Many people opposed Stephen, "Probably even many within the church would have preferred for him to take a more cautious approach. But Stephen saw certain implications in what the Bible taught and what Christ did, and he was willing to risk all for the truth of those implications... Stephen was able to act in a Christlike way under provocation" (*Fernando, pg. 244*), because he seemed to understand the importance of balance and intimacy with God.

The current climate seems to trend toward a noticeable imbalance in communities, systems, and personal relationships with God. Many pastors are facing persecution from their government, and even the people they care about in their communities as the traditions and customs of old have recently been removed by force, causing them to now seek the will of God for this new time, in these new circumstances.

As I pray throughout the week and take into consideration the individual needs and concerns of the specific people within our church community, I am bombarded with criticism as to my decisions, my theology, my

character. Even my Christianity has been brought into question as Christians from other churches, in other communities with their own unique circumstances become enraged that I should not show my support for them by following suit with what they think is best during this pandemic, and let me say, their language can be brutal.

The Lord has blessed me to meet many different people in my life. I have spent the summer camped next to the motorcycle rodeo, I have seen dear friends turn into drug dealers, I have spent time with prostitutes, professional thieves, thugs, gang members, the very rich, the very poor, abused people beyond number and the severely mentally ill, and yet in all my encounters, I can honestly say before God that I have never been so wounded as I have in the house of my “brothers and sisters in Christ”. Non-Christians have not spoken to me with such disrespect and judgment as I have experienced of late from Christians, and it saddens me, truly.

There have been public announcements accusing that any pastors that continue to hold church services have failed as shepherds, they do not care about the flock, they are killing children, and it has even been said that they are not Christians. How far do the assumptions go? I personally have received even more harsh criticism for opening a building that seats 400 to allow 15-20 people to attempt to seek the Peace of God in community with one another, in a safe way that allows them to be in far less contact than most other public venues.

As I earnestly pray and seek to minister to those in serious need within the community which I gave an oath to serve, a few that seem to have trouble letting go of the institution argue that things are not going back to the way they were quick enough, while others say shame on me for ever going back. I sure do not think anyone would trouble themselves to lie about me, for I have no significance but I do feel as though I can understand, in some small way, Stephen's struggle as he was sent out to share the love of God and be a hand of support, only to have that hand slapped away by his own people.

The result is always that the ones who suffer the most suffer the consequences. The hungry remain hungry, the needy remain needy while the ones in authority stand in the way of assistance. No, this is not a political comment, not even a comment about the politics within church systems. I wonder if the majority or leaders in that Freedman synagogue were fully aware of what those radical few members were doing when they went after Stephen. I am very much aware that the majority of those I have encountered within the American Baptist community have been supportively leaning on one another and sharing of resources for the good of all within their community. Even so, for any of you who have been wounded by Christians in the past, I apologize.

The problem is, and always has been radicalism, and this spirit knows no loyalty or party as, “Radicals often express their message in anger to an obstinate people. This was true of Stephen, but he exemplified the unusual combination of an angelic face and angry accusation of the Jews for rejecting God’s ways. If our hearts burn too with the things that are close to the heart of God, we will become angry at people’s disdain for the ways of God, But at such times we must reflect both the holiness and the love of God” (*Fernando*, pg. 249). The problem of radicals, is that love is not reflected in their words or actions, only the desire to win their argument.

I have to ask myself, and I encourage you to do the same as we continue to walk out these shaky times together, as God makes something new out of this mess, what is more important, the Kingdom or the world system? What should we hold on to, and what needs to go? This is something that will be impossible to understand unless, like Stephen, you are spending time in the presence of the Living God, either at home or in church, as the Lord leads you. Either way, I pray that you do not allow yourself too much time alone or forgetful that God is always present.

Please continue to remember that words are powerful. Words can hurt. Depression and suicide are at an all-time high as people of all ages are digesting bad news, hate and fear statistics. We are what we ingest people. There is only so much negativity and fear that a person can digest before it starts to affect our systems. I pray that this country may move forward with safe ways in which we can support each other, such as AA, churches, counseling centers and rehabilitation centers. May we think carefully before shutting down those places and groups where people are speaking life and the hope of Jesus Christ into the lives of the hopeless. Until then, let us not attempt to destroy others who are attempting to love their neighbors. Amen?

Communion Service

Communion Hymn: “*Let Us Break Bread Together*” # 699 (Click on link) https://youtu.be/Egk-pX_1nHg

In the Baptist tradition this is a covenant meal, which we partake of in remembrance of what Jesus has done on the cross for each of us. It is our understanding that all who profess Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior are welcome to share in this meal, which we partake of together, in the presence of the Lord. Before partaking of this remembrance meal, the members of the First Baptist Church of Fitchburg take a moment to read and remember our church covenant, which we proclaim as one body, in one voice united in Christ.

The Church Covenant May those of us who are members proclaim our church covenant.

“Having been led, as we believe, by the Holy Spirit, to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, and upon profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we now enter into Covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

We promise, as the Lord shall enable us, to strive daily to love according to the spirit and teachings of Christ, and to do all in our power to create a spiritual atmosphere within the Church, which will lead others to come into fellowship with God and into saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

As a fellowship of Christians, we promise by the help of God to nurture Christian growth in our homes, and to minister to the spiritual and material needs of one another. We further promise to strive for the advancement of our church in worship, in Christian Education, in service, and in fellowship; to observe its ordinances; to attend its services as faithfully as possible; to contribute regularly to its local and missionary enterprises; to unite with some other church when living away; and by personal and group example, to commend the Christian way of life to all.

May the blessing of God our Father, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, and the Holy Spirit our Helper and Guide ever rest upon us.”

Communion Prayer:

God of the table, You feed the wild birds of the air with fruit-filled branches, and we flock to Your table today longing to taste of the hope and healing that You have promised. Nourish us, we ask, with the bread that sustains our souls in the face of suffering. Wash over us with holy streams of care, reviving our roots in You Lord. May You bless these elements we share that the future You long for might burst into bloom in our hearts and in this world, for we ask this in the name of the First Fruit of Salvation, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Words of Institution:

On the night that He knew would be His last with them before the cross, our Lord gathered His disciples for a feast. They had walked many miles together. They had known trials. They had seen wonders. They would soon need to trust that God is in the business of bringing hopeful futures from even the most painful times.

The Bread:

So, He took the bread, asked the Father to bless it, broke it and shared it with those around Him, saying, “*Take, eat, do this in remembrance of me*” (Luke 22:19).

Take, Eat.

The Cup:

“*In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you”* (Luke 22:20).

Take, Drink.

Every time we do this, beloved co-workers in Christ, we too remember that God is in the business of bringing hopeful futures from even the most painful times. We eat and drink today to be filled to the brim with that Good News. We eat and drink this day to remind ourselves that we are holy channels of Christ's hope and healing for ourselves, others and for our world.

And so we proclaim Jesus and remember Him, until His return!

After the meal, Jesus and His disciples went out to the mount of olives and sang hymns. Please join me in heart and spirit in singing the first verse of our traditional closing hymn,

Hymn:

“Blest Be The Tie”

*Blessed be the tie that binds, Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds, Is like that to that above.*

Benediction:

May we each go for the bearing the Good News that God promises a future full of hope. May we go forth with expectant eyes, watching for the fruit God will bring for the, and may we go out into the world with courage, and compassion through the Spirit of peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

May the Lord bless and keep you all.



Works Cited

Bible verses in citations *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise listed.

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