

Acts 7: 55-60 “Risky Persecutions” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/3/26

It was the darkest moment in our Christian church history, not the universal church, but the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) history. It was a time that most would prefer to forget, to sweep under the rug, especially here in California. As a denomination, we had set ourselves up to be independently governed, each congregation hiring and firing their own pastors at will, with little oversight. Each church determined how they would interact with others and rarely was the word “covenant” addressed in response to national, regional and local bodies.

Accountability had slid by the wayside in deference to increasing attendance. After all, we were the first denomination founded on American soil in the heart of Kentucky 1832, and we still held to that strong, independent pioneer spirit. As KFC’s Colonel Sanders, one of our earlier church members used to say, “Do all you can and do it the best you can – it’s the only way you get that feeling of accomplishing something.”

For us, accomplishing something translated into spreading the gospel in persuasive ways which brought results. In the 1970’s, one Christian Church pastor with no formal education or pre-screening started a church in Ukiah, then San Francisco, and eventually in LA that grew rapidly. The pastor’s success meant that people looked the other way when rumors began to bubble up about his charismatic personality and his effect on people. So what? Jesus was charismatic in his own way and look how that turned out – Pastor Jim Jones was getting quite a following at People’s Temple as the church advocated racial diversity, surrendering materialism, and helping the poor. By the time the denomination’s leaders figured out what was really happening behind closed doors, it was too late – a cult had taken shape under a paranoid, power-greedy man who was brainwashing people into eccentric and dangerous beliefs. Jones’ ordination was rescinded, the church’s land ownership challenged, and law enforcement investigated fraud, child endangerment, sexual harassment, kidnapping, and more. Thus, Jones took as many members as he could to Guyana where in 1978, as some of you may remember, over 900 people committed suicide by drinking the kool-aid which promised salvation. Media accounts said

followers were under the hypnotic spell of a maniac; they were insane victims of a psychotic leader who led them to their demise. It was said that Jones' followers were mostly poor, ignorant, oppressed people whose suffering made them easy prey for the alluring promises of a self-proclaimed messiah like Jones. For Disciples of Christ, the tragedy prompted needed changes and more stringent oversight of clergy.

Accountability and covenantal relationship and responsibility became key aspects of church affiliation – no one was deemed “untouchable” and higher standards for ordination and keeping ministerial standing were put into place. It was a painful lesson for a relatively young denomination.

This past week, King Charles and Queen Camilla paid our relatively young nation a visit to honor our 250th birthday. I was reminded of the painful lessons we are still learning as a nation. In comparison to the long history of England, we are but toddlers still cutting our teeth on the precepts we hold dear. It was heartening to see the unanimous applause King Charles received across political lines at his congressional speech commending our government's emphasis on checks and balances. We hold such things dear, as well as our emphasis on “freedom of religion” which shouldn't be overlooked. Yet, these values continue to be challenged behind closed doors. The idea that Americans are free to practice faith as we choose has too often been misconstrued to justify persecution, idolatry, bigotry, paranoia, and greed. These are the rocks that have been used to stone our freedoms to death. We have turned a blind eye towards integrity, honesty, and accountability when it comes to those who lead us. That path, as exemplified in Jonestown, only leads to destruction. Therefore, I am grateful for today's lesson from Acts, as difficult as it is to hear for those of us who are still learning and those who have experienced the rocks of persecution coming down upon us.

Earlier in Acts (ch. 6), Luke tells us that “the disciples were increasing in number.” There must have been thousands and thousands by then. One of the problems that came up early on was how to take care of the poor, especially the widows who couldn't support themselves. The Hellenists or Greeks who had become

believers were “murmuring against” the Hebrew or Jewish believers because the Hellenist widows were being left out in the daily distributions. Think of it as “Meals on Wheels” coming to your doorstep but some were being overlooked. Peter, John, and the other apostles heard the complaints and told the people that since they were so busy preaching, the people needed to select 7 others to be appointed for the job of basically waiting tables. The want ad would have read something like this: “Waiter wanted: Only those persons who have a good reputation, filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom need apply.” Stephen and six others were chosen and set aside to wait tables. Yet we never read anything about Stephen doing such a thing. Luke gives us no stories of feeding the poor but instead tells us Stephen didn’t stay where he was supposed to – he did the unexpected, he went where he believed God was calling him. Apparently, Stephen does great signs and wonders among the people. But we don’t know exactly what that means so we have to use our imaginations. Maybe he was like Bruce Willis in Die Hard, saving innocent people from charging Roman chariots barreling down quiet village streets or Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society teaching young people the power of self-expression to save their tumultuous lives. Stephen must have held to some kind of idealism about how people ought to be, how the world should respond to Christ’s teachings, and how to follow God’s will. He took risks and found himself in trouble with the authorities much the way Jesus did. In fact, his story has some dramatic parallels to Jesus’. The people began spreading false stories about him, telling lies about him, just as they had against Jesus. They set him up and found false witnesses who were willing to tell lies in public. The high priest or denominational head comes and asks, “Are these things true?”

Then this courageous young man began to preach. He didn’t answer the question but instead preached as God led him. He began with God’s call to Abraham and traced the history of God’s workings with God’s people from that time forward, speaking of Moses and the burning bush, the 40 year journey through the wilderness, the giving of the 10 commandments, the building of a temple by Solomon, all the while reminding the people of how they repeatedly turned away from God. The gist came in

verse 51 as he says that the people of God have been an ornery lot from Day One, “stiff-necked” and mean as everybody else. There hadn’t been a prophet of God’s they hadn’t had it in for. The way they had treated Jesus was the last and worst example of how they not only missed the boat, but had tried their hardest to sink it altogether. The authorities were naturally enraged and illustrated the accuracy of Stephen’s sermon by taking him out and stoning him to death. Stephen’s words in those final moments echoed Jesus’ on the cross, “Receive my spirit” and “Do not hold this sin against them.” Dying for what he believed in prompted some to claim Jones wasn’t any different than Stephen. But that was the only thing the two had in common. History proved Stephen to be the first martyr of the Christian faith while Jones was a crazed and delusional fanatic. Time revealed Stephen to be a hero of the faith whose sacrifice wasn’t demeaned by psychological or sociological factors, but verified as the result of a rational person willing to die for the same faith by which they lived. His selfless faith matched his selfless death.

We still see such things today where sacrifices are made, not always to the extent of life or death, but a willingness to stand for what is true and good. After an older Catholic nun was attacked in Israel and knocked to the ground this past week, suffering bruises and contusions, a stranger intervened on her behalf and pushed the attacker away. A West Coast Disciples of Christ pastor spoke up for the value of checks and balances in our government and was subsequently placed on the “No-Fly list” and followed around town by a black SUV with tinted windows... still three months later. A young man watched as agents dropped a young woman suspected of being an immigrant and he intervened to protect her from being physically beaten and he in turn was shot to death. To such a church and nation as this, Stephen preaches not words of retreat, not words of compromise, but words of conviction and power. If God’s story over history means anything, it is that there is a better way of living life. If the Easter story means anything, it is that God promises an end to the mistaken ways we have conducted business and that God can save us from ourselves. Rocks of persecution can come from unexpected sources, but the good news comes from Stephen’s lips, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” May we learn from our mistakes and rejoice at the promise of victory God provides when we practice a true and selfless faith which is worth our very lives.