

## **“Jesus Chooses Us”**

### **Acts 7:55-60**

Stephen’s speech seals his doom. As Stephen recounts all of Israel’s history, going all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon, and then ends his speech with these words in verses 51-53 . . . <sup>51</sup>You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. <sup>52</sup>Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. <sup>53</sup>You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

Stephen has unfolded a drama of a people’s infidelity to the purposes of God. God’s people have been stiff-necked and unfaithful.

Verse 54 – “When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.” The high priest and other leaders of the temple are again enraged with a man prophesying against their temple and accusing them of persecuting God’s people.

And then as if to seal his fate, Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit, gazes into heaven, and sees the glory of God with Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

With no intention of keeping his heavenly vision to himself, Stephen says, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

Stephen faithfully confesses Jesus as the long awaited and exalted Messiah who now rules over all. Jesus is to be confessed and obeyed or rejected at the peril of rejecting God himself. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus. The temple leaders cover their eyes; plug their

ears in hopes of silencing such words, for if Stephens's vision is true, then those who dare to oppose this Jesus are enemies of God. The accusers stand accused.

The storm which has been gathering force throughout the first seven chapters of the Book of Acts breaks with all fury.

Verses 57-58: "With a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."

The demons have been set loose. There will be no proper courtroom trial. There is only an angry mob that drags Stephen outside the gates of the Holy City and throws stones at him.

Verses 59-60: While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus receive my Spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

The persecution and martyrdom of Stephen is not an isolated act of violence. The community is now hunted down and scattered into Judea and Samaria. Little did the followers know then that the impetus for this far-flung evangelism would be persecution! These refugees, scattered like seed, take root elsewhere and bear fruit. God is able to use even persecution of his own people to work his purposes. Not even this new demonic force named Saul will quench the spread of the gospel. On the road to Damascus, Saul encounters the risen Christ and becomes Paul who would be most responsible for the spread of the gospel in the first century.

Jesus chose Stephen to follow him and Stephen became the first Christian martyr. Jesus chose Saul who became Paul to follow him and Paul went from persecuting Christians to becoming the most effective Christian evangelist in the first century.

Jesus chose Stephen. Jesus chose Paul. Jesus chose Pastor Don. I appreciated Pastor Don's Lenten devotional when he wrote about being chosen based on John 15:16.

Jesus is spending his last minutes with his followers in the Jerusalem upper room before departing for the Garden of Gethsemane and his arrest. Jesus reminds his followers of their being "chosen" to bear fruit.

**John 15:16 - *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.***

### **Picked for the Team.**

I went to a one room school for my elementary education. Just one teacher taught all the eight grades. Imagine that! The school house was out in the country at the intersection of two county roads. I had nearly two miles to walk to school. There were usually about 25 students enrolled. Recess time was special. The teacher would usually appoint two older students as captains of the teams. These captains would get to choose their team, one by one. I can still remember the joy and delight in being picked for the team. I was wanted. I was expected to help the team. I was determined to be a key player to win the game.

This experience came to mind when I was ordained into the Christian ministry of Word and Sacrament on June 13, 1948. Dr. Liefeld, my favorite Seminary Professor, preached my ordination sermon and based it on the text that I quoted above. YOU DID NOT CHOOSE ME, BUT I CHOSE YOU. Those words have meant a lot to me through the years of my ministry. Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, picked me for His Team. He wanted me to bear fruit for His Kingdom. Me, the little farm boy, educated in a one room school was being called to minister in His name. What

a gift! What a challenge! What a feeling of being wanted and needed! Many times in my ministry when I felt inadequate or discouraged I would recall these words and found some renewed sense of being wanted and needed for His ministry. These words meant I had the Lord's backing, His blessing and His Presence!

As you read this devotion, read the text again and have it apply to you. Know that you have been picked for His team. You have been called to bear fruit for His Kingdom. Your relationship with Jesus is just not based on your choice, but His choice. He has chosen you to be a disciple of His. Privileged to join Him in the high calling of Christian ministry! Rejoice in it. Feel empowered to serve with Him.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord Jesus! Help me to believe and accept the call to be your disciple. To believe that I am a member of your team and that I can indeed bear fruit for Your Kingdom.

Amen

Jesus chose Stephen. Jesus chose Paul. Jesus chose Pastor Don. Jesus chooses you and me to be part of his team. Jesus chooses you and me to bear fruit for his kingdom. Chosen in baptism and empowered by Holy Communion, together we are the Body of Christ in the world. Together we do the ministry of Christ.

In doing the ministry of Christ in this country, we are not martyred like Stephen. But sometimes there is persecution for doing what God has called us to do.

In the March 16 *Plain Dealer*, two months ago, Connie Schultz wrote about a Cleveland teacher and her husband. It grabbed my attention that morning when I read it. It wasn't until a week later that I learned that teacher is a daughter of Divinity who had learned during her

formative hears from Pastor Don and other Divinity teachers that God had chosen her to share her gifts in the classrooms of our Cleveland Public Schools. I share with an excerpt from that story . .

Like most people, I could easily rattle off the names of several teachers who changed my life by the way they lived theirs. I'll spare you that walk down my memory lane.

Instead, I want to quote another self-described conservative who had a lot to say about character. His recent e-mail to me echoed the sentiments expressed by many readers who object to various states' legislative attacks against public school teachers, including those in Ohio. These letters and e-mails are not from teachers, but from those who love them.

This particular reader is a business analyst. He made it clear that, while our dads held similar blue-collar jobs, he and I grew up to disagree on many issues. He's not a fan.

But he does share my high regard for the men and women paid by taxpayers to teach America's children. He's been married to one of those dedicated public servants in Cleveland for nearly 14 years.

"We spend tons of money on supplies for the kids," he wrote. "I have begged her to leave Cleveland and she refuses to because it is her calling. I should be so lucky."

To insulate this man and his wife from the current blood sport of teacher-bashing, I won't name them. He did give me permission to share the recent letter of apology he wrote to his wife:

*Dear Honey,*

*I'm sorry. . . .*

*I apologize:*

*For letting people tease you about having the summer off and not asking them to thank you for the tough days ahead that begin in early August. I know for a fact you work more hours in those 10 months than many people do in 12. All those hours are earned.*

*For complaining that my Sunday is limited with you because you must work.*

*For making you think you have to ask permission to buy a student socks, gloves and hats.*

*For not understanding that you walk through a metal detector for work.*

*For leaving dirty dishes in the sink [when you awoke] for your 4 a.m. work session. I should know you have to prepare.*

*For thinking you took advantage of the taxpayers. Our governor continues to live off the taxpayer dole, not you.*

*For counting the time and money you spend to buy school supplies.*

*For not saying "thank you" enough for making the world and me better.*

*I love you.*

In this husband's apology, we learn a lot about the remarkable teacher who is his wife. Her students sure are lucky. Every day that she shows up with such optimism is another day her students get a chance to believe in a better version of themselves.

Thankfully, this teacher is not an anomaly. Despite recent attacks on their pay, motives and even their supposed lifestyle, the majority of public school teachers across the country continue to bring their talent and high ideals to some of our most troubled districts. . . .

We know that children watch, and learn. And what they are sure to understand is that . . . their teachers refuse to give up on them.

Talk about a lesson in character.

Jesus chose Stephen. Jesus chose Paul. Jesus chose Pastor Don. Jesus chose Susan. Jesus chooses you and me to bear fruit for his kingdom.

May the peace of God . . .

#576 – We Are All One in Mission