

**1 Timothy 6:11-16 Acts 6:1-15; 7:54-8:1 May 10, 2020**

**Fifth Sunday of Easter**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **SOMETHING TO LIVE AND DIE FOR**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

In the summer of 1963, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I have a dream speech.” He concluded his speech with a litany of dreams which included:

- that sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will be able to live together as brothers
- that his children would one day will judged on the basis of the content of their character, not the color of their skin
- that one day in this land the words of Amos will become real and “justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream”
- that one day we will recognize the words of Jefferson that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights”
- that one day “every valley shall be exalted, and every hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together”

Dr. King ended his speech with the dream and the faith that “we will be able to achieve this new day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing with the Negroes in the spiritual of old: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

But ***this*** “I have a dream speech” was not delivered on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. No, Dr. King delivered this precursor to the most famous “I have a dream speech” two months earlier on June 23 at the conclusion of the Walk to Freedom, at Cobo Hall in Detroit. About halfway through that speech, Dr. King explained the power of the non-violent movement he promoted. He said, “You see, this method has a way of disarming the opponent. It exposes his moral defenses. It weakens his morale, and at the same time it works on his conscience, and he just doesn’t know what to do. If he doesn’t beat you, wonderful. If he beats you, you develop the quiet courage of accepting blows without retaliating. If he doesn’t put you in jail, wonderful. Nobody with any sense likes to go to jail. But if he puts you in jail, you go in that jail and transform it from a dungeon of shame to a haven of freedom and human dignity. And even if he tries to kill you, you’ll develop the inner conviction that there are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true, that they are worth dying for. ***And I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.***”<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added)

In his life, and certainly in his tragic and untimely death less than five years later, Dr. King demonstrated the truth of what he preached that June day in Detroit. He found something to live and die for. In that sense, Dr. King was a martyr.

A martyr is someone “who willingly accepts being put to death for adhering openly to one’s religious beliefs.” By extension (and not necessarily in a religious sense), a martyr is someone “who sacrifices his or her life, station, or something of great personal value, for the sake of principle or to sustain a cause.”

Did you know that our English word “martyr” is derived from the Greek word “μαρτυρεω” which means “to bear witness, to testify, to be a witness”? Today’s Bible story is about Stephen, often called the first Christian martyr. Certainly, Stephen was a martyr because he willingly accepted being put to death for adhering openly to his faith in Jesus Christ. But, before he died, Stephen was a martyr in the sense that he bore witness to and testified to the Righteous One, Jesus Christ, not just in what he said in his speech to the religious leaders, but also in how he lived.

And, so, today I would like for us to consider what it means to be martyrs for Jesus Christ, particularly in how we live day in and day out. I came across a saying that sort of re-words Dr. King’s claim “that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.” The saying is, “Find something you would die for and live for it.”

It’s easy to focus on Stephen’s gruesome death by stoning at the end of the story. He surely died as a martyr, whose face was like the face of an angel, who gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus, who faithfully prayed for Jesus to receive his spirit and for God to forgive his executioners. But we can’t forget how he lived, for he just as surely lived as a martyr and witness to the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. Stephen was:

- chosen by the church to serve people in need in his community
- a man of good standing, full of the Spirit, wisdom, grace, and power
- someone who did great works and signs among the people
- someone who made the good confession of faith in the presence of many witnesses [an aside: how ironic it is that Luke specifically identifies Stephen’s opponents as “false witnesses”!]

One of the best ways to understand and interpret the Bible is to read other scriptures that cast light and expand the meaning of the story you are reading. Stephen died as a martyr and witness to Jesus Christ not long after Jesus himself died a martyr’s death after he faithfully bore witness to God’s power, mercy, and grace. Some twenty years later, the apostle Paul (who, before he met the risen Lord on the Damascus Road, stood by and looked on approvingly as Stephen was stoned to death) found himself in similar circumstances as he languished in prison in Rome. There we believe he “willingly accepted being put to death for adhering openly to his religious beliefs.”

As Paul’s ministry and his very life drew to a close, he passed along some advice to his ministry companion, Timothy. He told the young man, “Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” Paul then charges Timothy to

keep the commandments of God, “in the presence of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession.” (1 Timothy 6:12-13) Perhaps you noticed how closely the story of Stephen’s ministry, arrest, interrogation, faithfulness, and death followed the story of Jesus. Trust me, that’s no coincidence on the author’s part . . .

As always, the question we need to ask ourselves as we hear God’s Word this day is: What does Stephen’s story mean for our lives? Well, one way to answer that question is to take Paul’s advice to Timothy to heart as 21<sup>st</sup> century believers in the Righteous One, people who are called to be witnesses – martyrs, if you will. “Fight the good fight of the faith. Hold fast to the good confession you made in the presence of many witnesses.”

It is true that in many places in our world today Christian believers find themselves in the same situation as Stephen – facing death for their witness to Jesus Christ, martyrs in the ultimate sense. But you and I, God willing, may never find ourselves in such circumstances. Does that mean Stephen’s story has nothing to say to us? Quite the contrary! Even if we never become martyrs of the faith in the ultimate sense, each of us faces circumstances and situations that, one way or another, ask us to make and hold fast to the good confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

In other words, since most if not all of us won’t **die** because of our faith in Jesus Christ, it’s all the more important how we **live** because of our faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, if in Jesus Christ we have found something (or, more correctly, **someone**) we would die for, then let us live for Jesus Christ.

In the Presbyterian Church, we’re not too big on “saints,” at least not in the sense of religious figures from the past whom we revere and to whom we pray for intercession before God. However, an important part of our Christian faith is what we call the “communion of saints,” that great cloud of witnesses (there’s that word again!) that surrounds us and encourages us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, to fight the good fight of the faith, to hold fast to the good confession.

Our *Glory to God* hymnal includes a delightful hymn that is more familiar to Episcopalians, called “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God.” It was written in the 1920’s by Lesbia Scott, who wrote hymns for her children, many times at their suggestion. She wrote this particular hymn for an All Saints’ Day celebration. According to one history of the song, “it stresses that saints not only lived in the distant past but also may live and work today as they carry out the everyday activities of their lives.”<sup>2</sup> As I read the words, think about how they might apply to your witness as you carry out your everyday activities. You’ll notice the distinct British setting of this hymn. Also, notice how she includes martyrs in the ultimate sense and witnesses in what we might describe as more mundane, ordinary settings.

*I sing a song of the saints of God,  
patient and brave and true,  
who toiled and fought and lived and died  
for the Lord they loved and knew.  
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,  
and one was a shepherdess on the green:  
they were all of them saints of God,*

*and, I mean, God helping, to be one too.*

*They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,  
and God's love made them strong;  
and they followed the right, for Jesus' sake,  
the whole of their good lives long.  
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,  
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast:  
and there's not any reason, no, not the least,  
why I shouldn't be one too.*

*They lived not only in ages past;  
there are hundreds of thousands still;  
the world is bright with the joyous saints  
who love to do Jesus' will.  
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;  
for the saints of God are just folk like me,  
and I mean to be one too.*

Throughout my life, I've wondered if I would be willing to make the good confession if it meant being a martyr/witness in the ultimate sense. Because Jesus died for me, I hope and pray I would be able to die for him, if it ever came to that.

More important, though, is if I am willing and able to live for him now, if I have the courage to "follow the right, for Jesus' sake, the whole of my good life long." And I would ask you to consider the same question: If you have made the good confession in Jesus Christ, if you have found in Jesus someone you would die for, are you willing to live for him now?

A prevalent message in this coronavirus pandemic, a message of encouragement and hope and motivation, is "We're all in this together." That is definitely true for those of us who are part of the communion of saints, the body of Christ. And, if we're all in this together as the Wallace Presbyterian Church, let us ask ourselves as a church, "Are we willing to live for Jesus?"

As they say, "Can I get a witness?"

***Let us pray: Good and gracious God, your Son, Jesus Christ, invites all people to follow him and become his disciples. Touch our hearts, enlighten our minds, and stir our spirit. Help us daily to follow him; by living his Word and proclaiming his Good News to those around us. May our faith in you increase, may our hunger for the Gospel intensify, and may our church be strengthened as we learn to love one another as he has loved us. For this we pray, Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., “Address at the Freedom Rally in Cobo Hall,” June 23, 23, 1963, Detroit, MI at [www.kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://www.kinginstitute.stanford.edu).

<sup>2</sup>C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘I Sing a Song of the Saints’ of God” at [www.umcdiscipleship.org](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org).