**Be Kind, Be Strong**

Acts 7:55-60  
1 Peter 2:4-8

The pews are full. Stephen had been up late the night before putting the finishing touches on his sermon. He had prayed about what he needed to say. He knows it will not be easy, but he wants to find the right words that will move hearts and minds. He is coming to the conclusion of his message, when according to Luke the people in the congregation “covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.”

I am guessing this is not one of the texts Glen put on his promotional material when recruiting students to attend United Theological Seminary. “Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.” Because I have talked with Glen about these things, I know Glen was truthful about the challenges faced by seminary graduates. Many churches continue to be in decline, with older and older populations. A number of churches have closed or moved to part time ministry. The opportunities are fewer and those that remain often face real problems. But, I suspect that even Glen, as honest as he was about all the challenges facing those interested in serving the church, did not draw upon Stephen as an example of what ministry has to offer.

Besides the fact that Stephen presents a less than desirable outcome for our seminary trained friends, like Tom, Kathryn and many others, the story about Stephen is really less about the fate of potential preachers and more about the challenges all us can face any day. This past week I had a conversation with my daughter about a struggle she is facing. Had this been 1960, 1970, even 1980, I would not have been surprised at what I was hearing. But, this is 2014 and somehow I expect things to be different today. Overall my daughter has been having a great year with AmeriCorps working in the National Civilian Conservation Corp program. But, in her last two month assignment she has been with a group of young men who continue to use language that she and all the other young women find to be disrespectful and sexist. Their opinions are ignored. They sometimes have been referred to as little girls. And if they bring any of this up, they are referred to with the “b” word.

Stephen is a truth teller about the presence of God’s love in our world, how it is embraced and how it is denied. That is what gets Stephen into trouble with the congregation. He confronts a situation, any of us, all of us can and do face. Do you say something when something needs to be said or do you turn away, hoping the problem, the issue, will simply disappear? Without question, it is risky business to speak up on behalf of the love and compassion of God. Yet, according to Luke this is our calling as those who follow the Way of Jesus.

Last weekend I joined five of our youth at Pilgrim Point Camp near Alexandria in a UCC retreat for middle school youth. The theme of the weekend was “Faith in Action”. There are, of course, a lot of ways to put one’s faith into action that don’t run the risk of getting stoned. One of the things we did while at the camp was help prepare the garden and small farm so it would be ready for use this summer. There was no one standing around with stones ready to toss at us for putting our faith into action by cleaning up the garden.

But, during the course of the weekend we also discussed other situations where one might be called upon to live out one’s faith. One of those situations was what do you do if someone in your class is getting bullied. Do you turn around and go the other way? Do you give quiet assent to avoid being the next one picked on, or do you speak up, because speaking up is what love requires? Speaking up comes with some risk.

What do you do if someone you care about is having issues with alcohol or some other addictive behavior? Do you say something or do you play it safe and avoid the potential of conflict and the risk the person you care about may become angry at you? At home, at work, with our friends, and even in our church, we encounter those times when like Stephen we are called upon to make a choice. Will we give witness to the love of God or will we remain silent, hoping to avoid any trouble?

In retrospect Stephen maybe could have taken his foot off the pedal a bit in his closing remarks to the congregation. After retelling the story of how God’s never ending love has been in hot pursuit of them from the very beginning and how too often they as a people had turned away from that love, Stephen begins his conclusion by saying “You stiffed necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did.” We can perhaps all agree that maybe Stephen could have been a little more diplomatic with this part of his sermon. If he had a Leadership Advisory Group like Tom, they probably would have given him a couple helpful pointers. “Good sermon Stephan, but you might consider revising that part about ‘you stiffed necked people.”

But, I suspect the reason folks got angry and went for the stones has little to do with Stephen’s tough words and everything to do with Stephen being absolutely clear that they are included in his truth telling and they need to make some changes. No one minds tough talk when it is about the other guy. As Liberals we are happy to go on and on about how conservatives are messing things up. Just don’t ask us to look at our own lives and ways in which we can become condescending. Don’t ask us to look at issues of privilege we have yet to face. Conservatives gladly point out all the problems with liberals, but are quickly in trouble with fellow conservatives by suggesting immigration reform or climate change are issues conservatives also must address and for which they have a responsibility. Stephen gets in trouble because he says clearly and unequivocally this story about turning away from the love of God is about you. It is about all of us.

Taking a risk and speaking up does mean things can go badly. That’s why we call it taking a risk. There is no guarantee that it will go well. People drag Stephen outside of the city and begin to stone him. But before dying Stephen has the opportunity to get the final word.

We all know that just getting the final word can be sweet revenge, even when things have gone badly. You probably heard the comments made this past week by Carl Rove about Hillary Clinton as Rove speculated that perhaps Hillary had suffered some sort of brain damage from her fall earlier in the year. “New York Rep. Charles Rangel quickly responded, “ if Karl Rove is questioning whether former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suffered from a brain injury, then all Republican 2016 candidates or “potential patients” should undergo psychiatric evaluations as well”. I don’t know how many times I have left a conflict of some sort thinking about the snappy retort I should have made. Some zinger, some final word like that made by Rep. Rangel, really putting them in their place.

Stephen has one last chance, one last opportunity for that final word, and what does he say? “Lord do not hold this sin against them.” No zippy put down. No angry retort. No bitterness. Only the assurance of forgiveness. This is no doubt why Paul says Jesus, the corner stone rejected by the builders, is a stumbling stone to many.” It goes against the grain to let love and forgiveness be the final word. We need the courage to speak up when love and justice are denied, but the final word remains love, the zinger is forgiveness. As Bishop Desmund Tutu reminds us, love, forgiveness and compassion are God’s Dream for us. God holds before us the potential that is in each of us to live out that Dream.

Following the phone conversation with my daughter Erica, as she and her peers continue dealing with the sexism of their male counterparts, I sent her a text that said simply, “Be strong. Be Kind.” I was speaking as much to myself as to her. After all, this is the calling for all who follow the path of Jesus.

**Acts 7:55-60**

*Our first lesson tells the story about Stephen who, because of a sermon, becomes the first martyr to give his life for following the way of Jesus.*

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and 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. 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.

**1 Peter 2:4-8**

*Our second lesson comes with the reminder that living out the love and forgiveness of Jesus often goes against the grain of human instinct. Although, Jesus becomes the corner stone of our faith, the way of life he offers is often a stumbling stone for many.*

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:  
   "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
    and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."  
  
To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall."