

Lenten Study 2021 – Week 5: St. Luke's Community of Disciples and Stephen

As we have been looking at the biblical examples of particular gifts and talents for leadership of some of the first followers of Jesus. It is in part from their faithful work that we today know Jesus and follow him as the community of St. Luke's in the diocese of Edmonton some 2000 years later. We can recognize still today many of the gifts the Spirit gave those first disciples still at work in our leaders and members shaping our work and faith as we follow today and we may see many other spiritual gifts that we didn't examine.

What Rev. Scott has been trying to do in looking at the examples of the biblical characters is not only to help us read and learn the scriptures in a different way but also to help us think a bit differently about how we are church together.

Each of us are formed and changed and inspired by God's gift of life at work in us, and in our communities, in different ways. We bring different perspectives and gifts to our walk with Jesus and need those gifts to work together as serve one another and our neighbours.

In any church you will find people whose ministries, inclinations, interests, personalities, and gifts perhaps lead you to recognize in them traits that were familiar to you in the descriptions given of the biblical figures. Maybe you were also able to discern through your reading which of these people most closely resembles you and how you understand and live out your vocation to ministry in the Church. If you did not already begin to consider these possibilities along the way, you might even pause at this point and give it some thought.

One of the gifts of Rev. Scott's perspective to me is that it leads me to focus on the people and the community rather than the work or the product. While each of these disciples did amazing things together what made it possible was how they knew each other and trusted one another. The relationship between them is what could allow them, in all of their differences, be a people and community of blessing together. It's not that you need a complete roster of gifts to make an effective team, but that God will work great things in and through the people God as brought together if they allow themselves to be a community of faith, centered around Christ and following him together, even through differences, disagreements of disputes.

I also appreciate that for many of the characters examined we see their gifts for ministry most clearly as we see how they encounter the death and resurrection of Jesus. During this season of Easter, take some time to examine how you have encountered Jesus, and how you have felt and known his call on you and your life.

Which of the characters examined do you most resonate with? Why?

Are there other biblical characters who you think of when you think of the ministry of yourself or others?

What is Jesus calling you to do or to share?

If you were one of the characters we looked at, what story or moment from your life would you share?



Stephen Keeping Accounts

While there is little recorded about Stephen in scripture (just a few references and a single address in Acts). We do know two especially important things about Stephen, however, from which we can derive some substantial contributions towards our ongoing attempt to diagram a multi-faceted shape of ministry: The first is that Stephen was among the very first deacons, and the second is that he was the first Christian killed for his public profession of faith.

Acts chapter 6 records the discernment of the twelve still together in leadership of the Jerusalem church which led to the choosing of "the seven" who will be commissioned to serve. Recalling the context leading to this decision, we do well to remember that, as the Church has begun to expand exponentially post-Pentecost, its ministry to marginalized peoples has grown with it. It does not take long until the apostles are struggling to keep up with all the needs they are

being called to respond to in this regard. As is so often the case during times of stress and pressure, mistakes are consequently made.

Women who were widows in first-century Palestine were in a real bind, in many cases with few options for how to provide for their families or even feed themselves. For this reason, sharing food with widows is one of the first concrete ministries of service to the wider community which the early Church undertakes. But there is a problem. The Hellenistic widows are receiving less than their portion of the communal sharing of food than the widows of Jewish ancestry, and complaints have begun to arise (Acts 6:1).

The seven, as Acts refers to them collectively, are called out from the community to attend to this specific justice issue, so that other leaders in the Church – i.e., at this stage "the twelve" – can focus on their own respective areas of oversight. The common translation in English renders this as the apostles saying they need someone else to take over from them the duty of "waiting tables." However, I think a better rendering is the variant that describes this responsibility as one of "keeping accounts" (Acts 6:2). The seven are given charge of ensuring that racial bias does not have a place in this ministry of feeding those widows who are in need – an important ministry indeed, and a paradigm example for many other forms of the same kind of oversight. While at this stage this group of ministers is not yet referred to as "deacons" explicitly, their successors in other communities soon will be (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8-13), and so they have been since.

Stephen is listed first among these seven and is the only one of this group to have additional information given about his character beyond the others who we are introduced to in name only. Perhaps this was done to give context for the confrontation

he would later have with the Sanhedrin, or it might have been because Stephen had a leading role within the group as a representative or spokesperson on behalf of the whole. Because of this apparent prominence, one of Stephen's traditional titles is that of Protodeacon – not necessarily to indicate that he was the first deacon (from the narrative it appears all seven are called and ordered to their ministry together), but rather because he is meant to serve as a prototypical example of the diaconal vocation. Of course, this does not mean every deacon has to do the same things Stephen did. Yet it does seem to imply that Stephen's way of exercising that ministry provides an outline or a template that will unfold in response to specific contextual concerns. For a substantial period the deacons as a distinct and permanent vocation of ordained ministry all but disappeared in the churches of the West, and was diminished greatly in the East. Fortunately, the last half-century or so has seen a recovery and a renewal of this venerable office in the Church. As permanent deacons increasingly return to the table (so to speak) as a full and equal ministry, in many cases a similar emphasis on being the ones who are called to notice on behalf of the wider Church where justice concerns are being neglected in both Church and world, stepping into the gaps, and helping the Church to respond more faithfully, has continued.

We Have Heard Stephen Speak

In addition to Stephen's common participation among the seven, we also see him exercise one specific function of his ministry uniquely – that of preaching. While we know full well that each of the leaders in the early Church which we have surveyed undoubtedly was involved in preaching in some form or another, and some of them in particularly focused ways (Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul), it is no small detail to note that the longest public proclamation of the word in the book of Acts is spoken not by Peter or Paul but by Stephen.

Beyond his traditional title of Protodeacon, Stephen has also commonly been memorialized as the Protomartyr. While this refers, of course, to the way that he gave his life in testimony to Christ, being stoned to death by those who were offended by his words, the more fundamental meaning of the word martyr is important to keep in mind here. Martyr means witness, in the sense of someone who proclaims, both by word and deed, the truth they have received through from Christ and the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note, how the content of Stephen's message sheds light on the form of witness which his grounding in the Spirit of the diaconate yields. He speaks not in the abstract, but in a context-specific way to address charges against him that he is acting and teaching in ways that oppose the Law, the Temple, and the customs of Moses (Acts 6:14). His proclamation is not a personal defense, but rather an exposition of Scripture, tradition, and his own experience of what God has done in Christ. Although you have to read between the lines to see it, since his style does not say it explicitly, Stephen's purpose is to challenge those who hold spiritual authority and who oversee the ministry of the Jerusalem Temple for allowing a system of injustice to prevail in "this holy place" (Acts 6:13), causing it to become more of an obstacle to people encountering the presence of God than the place where that presence uniquely dwells (Acts 7:48-50). In typical fashion, and like the tone of Jesus displayed in the clearing of the Temple courts narratives in the Gospels, this is a social justice sermon, seeking to reveal systemic marginalization by

calling the religious leaders of the time back to the sources and towards renewed integrity. It is a strongly worded rebuke, but one motivated by a deep passion for authenticity.

A Stephen type of ministry embodies a deep attention to the places where the community of faith and where the leadership of the Church is missing or misunderstanding the needs of the world; to paraphrase from the diaconal ordination materials in the Anglican Church of Canada, 'to interpret the needs of the world to the Church' and to call the Church to take better account.

How do we respond to the needs of the world at St. Luke's?

How do we remain accountable to one another and to our mission?

Have you been a witness of the gospel to others or have you seen such a witness?