

May 14, 2017 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Acts 6:8–15; 7:54–60

TITLE: Thrown Stones

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. 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.

“James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister, became nationally known as a martyr to the civil rights cause when he died on 11 March 1965, in Selma, Alabama, after being attacked by a group of white supremacists. Reeb had traveled to Selma to answer Martin Luther King’s call for clergy to support the nonviolent protest movement for voting rights there. Delivering Reeb’s eulogy, King called him “a shining example of manhood at its best” (King, 15 March 1965).

Reeb was born on New Year’s Day 1927, in Wichita, Kansas. He was raised in Kansas and Casper, Wyoming. After a tour of duty in the Army at the end of World War II, Reeb became a minister, graduating first from a Lutheran college in Minnesota, and then from Princeton Theological Seminary in June 1953. Although ordained a Presbyterian minister, Reeb transferred to the Unitarian Church and became assistant minister at All Souls Church in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1959. In September 1963 Reeb moved to Boston to work for the **American Friends Service Committee**. He bought a home in a slum neighborhood and enrolled his children in the local public schools, where many of the children were black.

On 7 March 1965, Reeb and his wife watched television news coverage of police attacking demonstrators in Selma as they attempted to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on what became known as “Bloody Sunday.” The following day, King sent out a call to clergy around the country to join him in Selma in a second attempt at a **Selma to Montgomery March** that Tuesday, 9 March. Reeb heard about King’s request from the regional office of the Unitarian Universalist Association on the morning of 8 March, and was on a plane heading south that evening.

As Reeb was flying toward Selma, King was considering whether to disobey a pending court order against the Tuesday march to Montgomery. In the end he decided to march, telling the hundreds of clergy who had gathered at Brown’s Chapel, “I would rather die on the highways of Alabama, than make a butchery of my conscience” (King, 9 March 1965). King led the group of marchers to the far side of the bridge, then stopped and asked them to kneel and pray. After prayers, they rose and retreated back across the bridge to Brown’s Chapel, avoiding a violent confrontation with state troopers and skirting the issue of whether or not to obey the court order. Several clergy decided to return home after this symbolic demonstration.”

Rather than returning home after the symbolic march and demonstration “James Reeb decided to stay in Selma until court permission could be obtained for a full scale march, planned for the coming Thursday. That evening, Reeb and two other white Unitarians dined at an integrated restaurant. Afterward they were attacked by several white men and Reeb was clubbed on the head.”

(http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_reeb_james_1927_1965/)

Sisters and brothers, people are dying in the streets – from Ferguson to Pittsburgh, from New York City to Florida. This tragedy is not new or novel. Mothers have been standing at gravesites, mourning the loss of sons and daughters killed in senseless, illogical and unexplainable circumstances since the recording of time. All too often, the perpetrators of the murders look like, have something in common or are related to their victims.

People lose their lives as a result of what at first sight seems inconsequential: a teen leaving a party where they weren’t comfortable; a frat party where someone who is grossly intoxicated and falls down the stairs and no one calls for help; a woman stopped by a police officer and days later found dead in the jail cell; a pastor who felt called to stand with those demanding all people be treated equally, justly, respectfully, beaten in the street; God preferring one brother’s sacrifice over another, and then there’s Stephen. A man, full of grace and powers, whose death transformed a movement—resulting in the other disciples and apostles leaving Jerusalem, and moving into all the nations as Jesus commanded them to do.

Stephen called and ordained to minister to the needs of widows and others, doing great wonders and signs among the people, came to the attention of faithful Jews. According to Dr. Willie Jennings, these were people “who knew slavery either personally or from parental memory and their commitment to Israel and its way of live was woven into their

legacy of hard-won freedom and yet they perceived Stephen as a threat.” Stephen’s accusers, you might say were the people in the pews, who deemed themselves to be true believers, guardians of the traditions and outward expressions of what it meant to be righteous. They obviously weren’t aware that God was doing a new thing—tables had been turned, faith was now exemplified by “being” and rather than “doing;” that Jesus’ death and resurrection was the fulfillment of Torah and temple and that standing up as an agent of change might get you stoned.

Anytime there’s a change in society, standards or a country, a redefinition of normal, there is always an attempt to right the perceived wrong, an attempt to pull back to the center. The Jews of Stephen’s day had a desire to keep things as they had always been and saw Jesus and his followers as dangerous, instigators, insisting that the temple as a place of worship was no longer necessary, insisting that others, outsiders, who were not the chosen of God be allowed into the worshipping community.

Stephen’s accusers, and ultimately his murderers, missed the point—they were indeed chosen, but chosen to usher in the inclusion of all people into a relationship with God. They thought that the inclusion of the “other” would be to their exclusion. Dr. Jennings, states: “...the new order that surprises them requires a step of faith that can only be taken by yielding to the Holy Spirit. Only through the Spirit could a people imagine the embrace of Jesus to be the deepest and most beautiful embrace of a new way of life...one shaped by expansion, growth and joining.”

What we are witnessing in our country, in our communities, even in some of our families and homes is a resistance to expansion, growth and joining – a fear of bringing the other into full communion, an opposition to full-inclusion a fight to maintain a perceived balance that only includes those who are like us. So, we throw stones and hide our hands – stones that accuse, stones that divide, stones that denigrate, stones that killed Stephen’s body, but not his spirit – as his spirit was joined to the Christ’s spirit, when prayed, “Lord, Jesus receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Back in Selma, “several hours elapsed before Reeb was admitted to a Birmingham hospital where doctors performed brain surgery. While Reeb was on his way to the hospital in Birmingham, King addressed a press conference lamenting the “cowardly” attack and asking all to pray for his protection (King, 10 March 1965). Reeb died two days later.

James Reeb’s death provoked mourning throughout the country, and tens of thousands held vigils in his honor. President **Lyndon B. Johnson** called Reeb’s widow and father to express his condolences, and on 15 March he invoked Reeb’s memory when he delivered a draft of the **Voting Rights Act** to Congress. That same day King eulogized Reeb at a ceremony at Brown’s Chapel in Selma. “James Reeb,” King told the audience, “symbolizes the forces of good will in our nation. He demonstrated the conscience of the nation. He was an attorney for the defense of the innocent in the court of world opinion. He was a witness to the truth that men of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers” (King, 15 March 1965).

In April 1965 three white men were indicted for Reeb's murder; they were acquitted that December. The Voting Rights Act was passed on 6 August 1965."

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Brothers and sisters, stones are on the ground. Stones thrown in an effort to make us great again, but which in reality diminish by excluding, denigrating, and seeing those we deem as "other" to be feared rather than included, embraced and accepted. But fear not, beloved, thrown stones do take root, germinate and usher in the kingdom of God. Stones thrown and meant for harm, God meant for our good, as they are chipped from the corner stone rejected by the builder. Jesus, Stephen, James Reeb and so many others are stones that have been planted and one day will reap a harvest of justice, peace, love, equality and inclusion.

Amen