

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“A Community of Conviction”**  
**a series on *Becoming the Church***  
**Acts 7**  
**April 30, 2017**

Since the middle of December we’ve been working our way through the Gospel of Luke... following the story of Jesus’ birth, his life and ministry, and then finally his death and resurrection.

Today the narrative lectionary keeps us following the story of what took place, by moving to the second volume that Luke wrote, the Book of Acts.

In other words, Acts is the next chapter in the story that the resurrection sets up. The church as a community is beginning to embody the life and ministry of Jesus.

That’s where we are today... And for the next 5 or 6 weeks we’re going to begin to watch how this community of the resurrected one becomes the church... as a way to help us keep center in our minds and hearts what ***being the church looks like***.

We’re going to see this as we look at a few stories in Acts... and then the narrative lectionary will take us to Galatians for a few weeks to look at one of Paul’s letters. But all together, all of it is going to help us to think about, and to see some things at the core, of the life of the church from the very beginning.

Along the way we’re going to see that it can be a messy thing. Not everything in the church fits nicely and neatly. Not everyone gets along.

But we will also see that there are some fundamental realities that shape the life and the trajectory of the church... realities that are still at the core of what it means to be the church today.

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The first story that the lectionary gives us is the story of Stephen.

Now we had to cut a good portion of the reading because it’s so long. You see, Stephen preaches one of the longest sermons in the Book of Acts... because of it they stoned him.

So I will be preaching a very short sermon today.

Unlike Stephen, I’m not going to recount the entire Old Testament, but instead tell you that Stephen’s sermon was basically about the radical availability of God...which sounds like a good thing, right?

You’d think everyone would like that.

And they do, except when Stephen points out that we have this common tendency to oppose what God is doing when God shows up in ways that contradict our expectations.

The truth of the matter is... the religious folks in Stephen’s time, in our time, and even you and I, often end up opposing what God is up to... They did in the Old Testament. They were doing it again in Acts... and yes... we can often see that same pattern at work in the church today.

Of course, no one takes too kindly to being told you’re opposing God... especially when you’re spending your life believing that you are devoted to God.

So their anger builds as he goes on and on... and the mob mentality takes over... and next thing they know someone picks up a rock... and throws it... and then another and another.

And it's pretty shocking too... because remember these folks all know one another. The Jesus movement that Stephen is a part of is still all within the Jewish tradition at this point... There's no separate Christian Church.

Stephen is a Jew... just like most of the other of Jesus' followers... and those stoning him are Jewish... This is an interreligious conflict.

I mean these folks; they've probably worshipped together along the way,  
had pot lucks...

enjoyed one another's casseroles and brownies.

But none of that mattered anymore.

Anger and defensiveness and passion start bubbling over.

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It's one of those reminders that the people with whom we can get the most angry, the people that can trigger a deep reaction, ***are most often not people of other religions, but people in our own tradition... that we disagree with in our core.***

Have you noticed that along the way?

How much easier it is to get angry with other Christians who think differently than you? How it triggers something in you?

We cling pretty furiously to our way of believing, to what we already know or think we know... It's why Richard Rohr says that your most recent spiritual breakthrough becomes the biggest hurdle to your next breakthrough.

When we have a breakthrough of some kind, a new insight, we tend to cling to it ferociously. Without realizing it, we've made it into an idol.

So when someone starts to contradict or teach something other than what we've come to deeply believe... someone more conservative than us or someone more liberal than us... then some deep anger can get stirred up like no other.

Pay attention to yourself when that happens.

Chances are, whenever you feel the need to correct or to defend your conviction... whenever you feel that anxiety about someone else's beliefs stirring, ***chances are... you've been making an idol out of your own convictions.***

You see we get real touchy when people start messing with our idols. We get defensive real fast.

The mob certainly does there with Stephen. Anger flares. Passions get out of control... and they stone Stephen right there on the spot.

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There is one antidote to all this misguided idol making we have a tendency to do... and that is this: To keep the **object** of our conviction at the center of our gaze, rather than the belief or conviction that summons that object.

This is exactly what we see Stephen doing....

Stephen gazes into heaven... and sees the glory of God and Jesus there with him. Even as he is being pelted to death, he keeps his gaze on Christ... speaking the same kinds of words that Christ spoke on the cross.

“Lord, do not hold this against them,” Stephen says.

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,”

The mob has been focused on their convictions about the temple, and about their traditions, and about what the scripture says... but Stephen is focused on the **person** of his convictions. “Lord, Jesus.”

In fact, it’s that radical focus that many martyrs that follow Stephen also demonstrate... throughout the formation of the church.

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The word martyr in Greek is *martus*... the literal translation is actually “witness.”

Which is to say, a martyr is one who is a “witness.”

And the witness of Stephen... and the witness of Paul, and the witness of Justin the Martyr, and Perpetua and Polycarp and thousands of others who were put to death in the first 250 years of the church’s existence was the same, “Jesus is Lord.”

It’s the one profound conviction they would not let go of, even in the face of death.

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It’s hard for us... I think... to know what it’s like to hold our convictions in that way. None of us have been asked, and probably will never be asked to make that ultimate sacrifice for our faith conviction. In some ways that world feels fundamentally foreign to us.

When I was a teenager I would try to imagine what that would be like and ask myself if I was that committed. It was a kind of test I’d put myself through. And I would promise myself and promise God that I would be willing to die for Jesus... just like Jesus died for me.

But now that I’m an adult... I have to admit... I’m a little less sure about my courage. The questions around it get a little fuzzy. Sometimes what I don’t know, feels bigger than what I do know.

And likewise, in the next few weeks we will see the Church wrestle with it’s own questions as we move through Acts and Galatians. But through all the theological debates that were to come, all the arguing over Christology and theology and ethics and who can belong in the church and who cannot... and all the side issues,

and even all of the various convictions that we argue about today... none of that was what defined them.

**The church’s defining focus has always remained resolute on the person at the center of our convictions: the person of Jesus the Christ.**

We believe that something unique happened in the person of Jesus.

God was doing something profound in the life of the world through the birth of Jesus...and the death...and the resurrection of Jesus...something that changed the very nature of the cosmos.

This is what the early church was convinced of, and so we'll watch as everything else they had known,

everything else they had committed to,  
every other belief, tradition, value they had...  
now comes into a secondary role, compared to this one conviction.  
That's what they mean when they say, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

And it's why that is such a threatening thing to claim. When everything else becomes secondary to what God has done and is doing through Christ, it threatens the tradition, the foundation of everything.

Stephen is martyred by his own religious community because his primary orientation, his allegiance... undermines the foundation of their convictions, and practices, and way of life of the rest of his community.

Later that same primary orientation in the life of the church begins to threaten Rome.

That's fascinating to think about, isn't it? ...Rome, this massive, powerful Empire, felt threatened by this tiny, new religious entity.

You see Rome didn't persecute Christians because they had a problem with new religions. There were new religions popping up in the Roman Empire all the time. Rome celebrated their tolerance and their religious pluralism.

And yet... when it came to the Christians... this tiny fraction of their population... they got nervous.

You have to wonder why, don't you?

In part, it's because Christians practiced a way of life that subversively undermined the foundation of the way of life of everyone around them. Their primary orientation wasn't toward Rome or toward themselves... but toward the Kingdom of God.

"Jesus is Lord," meant they believed they were citizens of heaven, citizens of God's kingdom... God's life. They were part of an alternative reality with alternative values.

So they didn't participate in normal forms of entertainment... like going to the Colosseum to watch the gladiators.

And they didn't live like the safety and the stability that Rome provided, and the economics of Rome was what was most important to them...

And that made Rome nervous.

*You see... as much as the Roman Empire liked to think of themselves as religiously diverse and open-minded, **the most important religion for them... was the religion of Rome itself.***

It would have been fine to worship Jesus... as long as these Christians also sacrificed at the altar of Caesar.

It was a little thing really, but it was expected of everyone... It was just their way to pledge their allegiance to Rome... to the empire... to their flag and country.

But the Church was this community that was defined by one central conviction that undermined all of that, the conviction that "Jesus Christ is Lord"  
And that... that was all too threatening for the Romans. That was crossing the line.  
Because when you say Jesus is Lord, you're saying, "Caesar is not."

You're saying that Jesus is our hope... not Caesar  
"Jesus' way brings the peaceable kingdom"  
not "Caesar's way, and the Pax Romana"

So the emperors started finding Christian leaders... like Justin the Martyr, like Polycarp...  
leaders out of whom they could make an example... to try to get them to *denounce that nonsense...*  
and straighten everyone out.

But so many of these leaders just wouldn't do it.

I mean, it's not that they agreed even with each other on everything, the church had it's own questions they were struggling through. But there was this one central conviction that bound them all together, and that they would not let go of... It was the one central conviction that defined them.

And that conviction was so dangerous that it could not be left unchecked... it couldn't by Rome... and it couldn't by the religious leadership of the day.

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You see, when we proclaim that Jesus is Lord, we proclaim that our traditions and current convictions are not.

When we proclaim that Jesus is Lord, we proclaim that our country and our economy is not.

When we proclaim that Jesus is Lord,  
we proclaim that our bank accounts are not.  
we proclaim that the plans we had made for our life are not.

When we proclaim that Jesus is Lord,  
we proclaim that cancer is not, that death is not,  
that pain and emptiness is not.

When we proclaim that Jesus is Lord,  
we proclaim that perfection, and moralism,  
and our ideas and... yes... even scripture is not.

All of it is secondary to the person at the center of our conviction.

To confess Jesus as Lord, as we do in our baptism, we are proclaiming to the world that there is one fundamental reality that will shape our lives...  
and that is what God has done through Jesus  
and is continuing to do in our world...  
Reconciling all people to God's own self.

This is the conviction that Stephen and the Martyrs gave witness to.  
This is the conviction from which they would not waiver.

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This is the conviction that is still at the core of the life of the church today... in all of its beautiful diversity and all of its ugly infighting... in all of its different expressions around the world.

And here at Dayspring that's the one conviction that holds our life together. Even as we are a church that seeks to be open in heart and mind,  
even as we try hard to honor our differences.  
this one reality is what defines our life together.

It's part of what I love about the beginning of our mission statement: "*As followers of Jesus Christ, open in heart and mind...*" we say.

So in the midst of all our shared questions,  
in the midst of all conversations into which the resource group is going to be leading us,  
in the midst of all we have to figure out together... we stand in the long history of the church proclaiming one central conviction that defines us: Jesus is our Lord.

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You see, that's the conviction that Stephen and the other martyrs call us, not just to die for, but to live for... in every aspect of our lives...

They challenge us to live with the conviction that they died for.

Because the reality is, that you and I will probably never be asked to make that statement in front of a tribunal with our life on the line. But we all have many moments in which we are choosing between Christ and something else that vies for our ultimate allegiance.

Sometimes we choose well.  
Sometimes we do not.

It's why we need the church to gather again, to remind us again, to help us reclaim once more the person at the center of our convictions.

It's also why we come to this table again today.  
It is his life we feast on.  
It is the cup of commitment we drink again today.

Let's ask for God's grace to give us the courage,  
and the trust,  
to find a way to live our baptismal confession again.  
Jesus is Lord.

Amen.