

My sisters and brothers, over the last couple of weeks I have been more than a little heartbroken. Two weeks ago, Easter, there were coordinated bombings in three different cities in Sri Lanka. Over 250 people died including 40 children and over 500 were wounded. They were gathered in together for the worship of our Lord God Almighty, and targeted for that reason. There was a new report just this past Sunday about a shooting in a synagogue during worship. One woman died using her body as a shield to protect her rabbi. A man was wounded who then led children out of the sanctuary. Another man, a veteran, charged the gunman, shouting at him. The gunman dropped his weapons and ran out the doors of the sanctuary where he was captured by a U.S. border patrol agent. When I hear news of people here at home and around the world being harmed for their faith it makes me sat at first. Then I begin to hear the stories of the faithful; and the stories of the martyrs; and I am reminded of why the martyr's sacrifice makes such a powerful impact on the early Church and on Christian around the world today.

Let's start with Stephen. In the early Church they would meet every day for a Common Meal to hear preaching and receive Holy Communion. There were many for whom this was their only meal. The widows were definitely included in that group. When the number of people coming for the meal became too great the apostles prayed about it and decided to choose seven men. They called them deacons, and it would be their job to make sure no one was turned away hungry. Stephen was one of those seven.

Stephen was full of the grace and power of God. Stephen preached with power and authority and even performed miracles. Stephen lived as a powerful advocate and example for the spread of the Gospel. However, there were some in the church who did not like the things Stephen said and did. They stirred up rumors about Stephen saying he was speaking against Moses, God, the Law and the Temple. Stephen was drug before the council where the trouble makers brought in false witnesses and stirred up the scribes and the elders. Then Stephen began to speak. Stephen correctly preached about Abraham; the twelve patriarchs, Joseph in Egypt, Moses and the Exodus. About these things and the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness the elders and scribes found no fault. However, when Stephen spoke of Jesus of Nazareth and how the council had handed over the Christ to be crucified by the Romans the Council became furious with Stephen. They drug Stephen out of the city and there they intended to stone Stephen. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit looked up to heaven and said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). The elders and scribes started throwing stones at Stephen while Saul watched over the coats. As the stones struck Stephen he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v 59). Stephen knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this against them" (v 60). Then Stephen fell asleep and die as the stones struck him.

Stephen was the first martyr. He was killed to stop the spread of the Gospel, and yet those who killed Stephen failed – miserably. They failed because after Stephen was martyred a great persecution arose against the early church. Suddenly, this relatively localized sect of Judaism had to flee, and as they went they spread the Gospel where ever they travelled. Instead of stopping or killing the spread of the Gospel. The elders and scribes only managed to take a tiny sect of Judaism and fan it to the furthest corners of the earth.

Let's look a little closer at Stephen. There is nothing in Scripture that says Stephen wanted to die. Stephen was not suicidal. Stephen wanted to live. For Stephen living meant sharing what Stephen knew to be the truth. The truth Stephen shared was Jesus is the Christ, the King, God's anointed; and even though the Jews handed Jesus over to be crucified three days later Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and stands at the right hand of God the Father, Almighty. Amen? **Amen!** Amen?! **Amen!!** That is the good news. (pause) As good as the Gospel is and as much as the Jewish leaders hated it, what I think the Jewish leaders really wanted to

stop was the spread of the good news about Jesus Christ as the risen Son of God and rightful King above all kings. They wanted this little sect of Judaism to die out. It just did not go the way they thought.

The more Pharisees like Saul of Tarsus went house to house and persecuted the followers of the Way of Jesus Christ the more Christianity spread. Why do you think that was? (pause) Church, why is it that across history, whenever Christianity has been threatened, and the followers of Jesus Christ have been persecuted Christianity has spread further and hotter than before? The world should take note. The leaders of Christianity's enemies around the world should take notice. The quickest way to spread Christianity is to try to destroy it. (pause) The harder it is to be a Christian the more people want it; the more people are willing to live for it; and yes, even die for it. (pause) The problems arise for Christianity when it becomes easy. When Christianity is easy we tend to turn on one another. We create strife for ourselves where there should be none. We argue about the color of carpet, and cushions in the sanctuary. We argue about the style of music in our worship service or how long our worship services last. We argue about issues like homosexuality, gay marriage and the ordination of gay clergy. (pause) Are these issues important? (pause, shrug shoulders) Yeah. Probably, but compared the good news of Jesus Christ how important are they, really? What are we really all about? What are supposed to be about? Church, what keeps this group of people; this group in this room from being any different than the Lion's club, the Denton Elementary PTO, or South Davidson Youth Sports? (pause) I'll give you a hint. (pause) It all comes down to a man, dying on a cross, and saving the world.

My sisters and brothers, take a quick look around this room. (pause) Take a good look. (pause) By looking around this room would you say it is easy or hard to be a Christian? (pause, and wait for a response) Judging by the empty pews I would say we probably have it too easy. There are too many who take our mutual faith in Jesus Christ for granted. There are too many who are tied up in our petty differences. I have heard too many soldiers of the faith say things like, "They know where we are. If they want to come they'll come to us." (pause) My brothers and sisters that is **TERRIBLE!** That is the opposite of what Stephen died for. That is the opposite of what James, and Peter and Paul died for. That is the opposite of what the founders of this church and those who paid so this beautiful building could be paid off in five years lived for. That is the exact opposite of what the people in Sri Lanka died for. (pause) My mother has often said, "Faint hearts never won fair maidens." Stephen, and those who followed him were not faint of heart when it came to sharing the good news about Jesus Christ. That's the reason when Stephen died it only mattered because it gave others a reason to speak up that much more loudly for the Gospel. Stephen's torch, the light of Christ in a dark and troubled world, has been passed down through the centuries to us. Look around this room. Look at the people in this room. Consider the people we know who are not in this room. Consider the people we interact with on a daily or weekly basis who do not already have a church home. Why do we care so little about our faith that we cannot be bothered to strike up a conversation and in the process invite them to church? (pause) Think about it this way. When we die; when we are buried will the work go on in this place? (pause) When we die and we are buried will the work of spreading the Gospel go on in this community? (pause) How many of the ministries we support for the poor and working poor will continue? (pause) Let us not be timid. Let us not leave it to hope. Let's do our part to share that the risen Christ is what is really most important.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen.