

FCCS May 12, 2017  
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“As I Am”

It would not have been my choice to preach on the stoning of Stephen for Mother’s Day but the lectionary being what it is- here we are. As such let’s start off with some vocabulary.

Martyrdom is defined as someone who defends a moral truth even to the point of enduring death.

Jesus was a martyr- who preached nonviolent resistance unto the point of losing his own life- he did not expect others to do the same- to be clear.

Religious fanaticism a term often confused with martyrdom is less about an individual, it is about systemic control of others for the sake of a moral ideal.

Fanaticism is the vicious repression of those who do not fall into alignment with the chosen ideology, practice or policy.

When the Emperor Constantine (365CE) came into power and declared Christianity the national religion- his goal of unification was accomplished through the fanatical use of force.

Fascism- a word getting a lot of play these days- is a “political philosophy, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition,” so says Meriam Webster.

For our purposes, it is important to note that Steven was a Martyr. He was not a fanatic and he was not a fascist. The people who stoned him to death may have been both of those things, we don’t know for certain.

Who was Stephen?

On the east side of Jerusalem, looking toward the Mount of Olives, there is a gate that marks the place where this story is said to have taken place; Stephen, who was a follower of Jesus, but not a disciple was attempting to cross the Kidron to Bethany or to Jericho to continue spreading the Gospel as he understood it.

Stephen believed in caring for the most vulnerable and was about the work of raising funds and proclaiming the importance of offering relief to those in need. His colleagues had selected him for this task because they trusted him to procure and administer the funds fairly and without prejudice.

Stephen was devoted to this work and was clear that God was with him. His intention was to keep doing his work- he never set out to become a Martyr. Martyrs do not set out to be Martyrs.

Their lives are cut short in pursuit of living out a truth that they proclaim because they believe it will liberate the oppressed .

History has a slew of examples. Let's name a few...

Without exception, nearly all of the people we now look to as martyrs for justice, peace and equality died at the hands of those who were somehow threatened by the idea that the world should become more fair.

I have two stories about Stephen's this morning. Two Stephens who have changed my life and continue to inspire me; both of whom would be mortified by the idea of being called a Martyr.

Stephen Frugoli was one of my closest friends. He and his partner Steve Sutherland were two of the most beautiful, thoughtful, talented and charming men you could ever hope to know. They were also the first people I knew who were living with AIDS.

I'll never forget sitting with the two of them in a café after a rehearsal for 1940's musical revue we were working on together in basement theater in San Francisco- Steve offered me a sip of his coke. I took a drink without thinking about it but, later that night I could not sleep what for the worry I had that I might have gotten the disease.

That was back in the early days of HIV/AIDS when people thought they could catch it from toilet seats or touching people. There was so much fear, so much misinformation back then.

Stephen and Steve- the Steve's we called them, handled it all with such aplomb, such grace, such dignity. They never got mad at people for having to explain what was and wasn't true.

They never gave up on their friends who wanted to be supportive but had no idea how. And in the end when they both got very sick and could not be in the same hospital room because they were not legally married and in fact could not even be in the same hospital for some completely

inexplicable reason- their love for one another never faltered. Their lives were such a witness to love as I had never experienced.

Steve Sutherland died first and Stephen had an unexpected resurgence, almost as if he were living for two. When he learned that I planned to give up musical theater for ministry- he traveled to NYC to see me. I think he had come to talk some sense into me; himself understandably having very little tolerance for organized religion.

By then, he was six foot four and weighed about ninety-five pounds, he was so weak, yet so courageous and funny as hell. He visited with me for a week and at the end of that week he flew home with my cat, Clara Bow, so she would be there to meet me when I arrived post cross country trip with my brother in a U-Haul.

Stephen never claimed to understand why I was going to Seminary, but he understood that the love between he and Steve was part of the reason. He understood that I wanted to figure out how to make love bigger in the world and that was enough for him to give me his blessing.

When I did finally make it back to San Francisco, Stephen had become very ill and the two women he had moved in with- because his parents wouldn't have him- set up a round the clock schedule for all of his friends to trade off caring for his decrepit body.

**Stephen and Steve didn't set out to be martyrs, they set out to live what they believed and believe what they lived and they died doing it.**

On the last day I saw Stephen- he was unable to speak- a particularly cruel turn of fate for a man who was part of the original touring company of Les Miserable. As I sat at the foot of his bed, watching his fragile frame wracked with pain- I saw an image of Jesus.

Not Jesus on a cross, protesting against the reign of Empire, but Jesus as a man living and now dying with a terrible disease. So fully human and so fully Divine was Stephen in those last few days, that I knew in the end what we had set out to do in the world was one in the same.

The subject of my next story is still living- thank God! He is Stephen Ellis Morrison, who I used to call my father in love, before he was legally my father in law. From he and his wife Meg I have learned more than I could ever explain. They have been rock solid for Katie and for me as long as I have known her. They are third generation Presbyterians and they have been faithful to their church, even when their church was not faithful to them.

Meg and Steve were in this church alongside my parents on Mother's Day to hear my candidating sermon- just before you all voted to call me as your new minister- one year ago today.

Steve and Meg both spent their professional lives as teachers and although Steve had always dreamed of being a college professor he- being the most literate person I have ever known- gave his best teaching years to middle schoolers in downtown Pasadena.

Upon his retirement, much to his surprise, the school honored him with a huge celebration at the prestigious Huntington Library. There were people who came back twenty years after having Steve as their teacher to speak to the ways he had shaped their lives and inspired them to become who they are now.

Wednesday this past week was national teacher appreciation day and it brought to mind all those people who are working with children to create a brighter future. Those people, who likely could have been doing a million other things, chose to work in schools across our country for pitiful wages, under grueling circumstances, with dwindling resources- they are our present-day Martyrs. They never set out to be- that's just who they are.

And the thing my Stephen's and the Stephen in scripture have in common is that they lived and in some cases died with the kind of clarity that most of us only dream about.

They knew what they knew until others knew and that is the take home message today. How can we all live in such a way that **we know what we know until others know too?**

If I could rewrite the ending the stories of Stephen from scripture and Stephen and Steve, my friends, I would. We all want a perfect ending, but as the comic genius Gilda Radner put it, "some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next."

I need not tell you that **knowing what you know** does not insure you will know what our next move should be, it does not mean we control our own destiny or even our own day. But we can aim for clarity of purpose.

We are here for one purpose and one purpose only- we are here to love.

I know it... you know it, let's live in such a way that others will know it too.

Amen

