



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

1309 R Street * Lincoln, NE 68508 * (402) 474-1979 * www.stmarks-episcopal.org

The Rev. Deacon Ryan Hall
Sermon for 5th Sunday of Easter, RCL Year A
St. Mark's on the Campus
April 20, 2008

“A SIMPLE WAITER.”

Acts 7:55-60	Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16	1 Peter 2:2-10	John 14: 1-14
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Anyone who has been on a family vacation or around groups of children for more than 5 seconds has probably been in the situation where a squabble breaks out, often between siblings. When queried by parents tired of traveling for several hours and hearing the children fuss, one of the children snaps, “*Well, they started it!*”

Unfortunately, this sort of behavior is not confined to just children. I hear adults more and more these days behaving in such childish ways. In fact, it is one of the great ironies of life in modern America that on the one hand, we prize individuality (or rugged individualism as it is sometimes called) as highly as anything - for nothing in our culture, it sometimes seems, is more important than the individual.

Respect for the individual is not a bad thing, but the ironic other side of that coin is that we as Americans also have a very difficult time taking individual responsibility for our day-to-day individual actions. We hear excuses all the time. They blame their mother / father / the government / illegal immigrants / alien abduction, whatever. The credibility of people's excuses knows no logical end.

Don't get me wrong. Sometimes those excuses are legitimate. I am not advocating a philosophy where all that is needed to right all the wrongs in the world is for people to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” We live in a broken world where bad things (often *very* bad things) happen to good people through no fault of their own. Violence, abuse, war, any myriad of things like that are horrific tragedies often beyond the power and control of any one individual.

But, when I refer to the idea of people not liking to take responsibility for their own day-to-day actions, I'm referring more to the mundane, everyday excuses that go on in groups. I am sure you have seen an occurrence of this at work or at school. There is a group project that goes wrong, and one person gets blamed when really several people involved in the enterprise are at fault. In such cases, it is much easier to follow the path of least resistance and find a scapegoat, than getting the group to admit that perhaps the goals of the project were unrealistic from the start - or that there is plenty of blame to go around as to why something failed. Treating a symptom is often easier than curing a disease.

I bring up this notion of a “scapegoat” because the little snippet we get from the book of Acts this morning presents us with one of the two major scapegoats (aside from Jesus himself of course) from the stories of the New Testament. The person I am referring to is, of course, Stephen, the first martyr of the church, to whom I will return in a moment.

Another scapegoat in the New Testament is John the Baptist. If you recall, John the Baptist was the prophetic herald and baptizer of Jesus and probably one of the most colorful characters in the Bible. John the Baptist is described in the bible as being a wild-haired fire-and-brimstone preacher out in the wilderness who ate wild locust and honey and wore camel hair. John the Baptist, whom we did not actually read about today but I think is important for us to talk about, came to an ignominious end if you recall. The gospels tell us he got into a moral finger-pointing contest with King Herod because Herod had married his own brother's wife. John the Baptist is ultimately beheaded over the matter. If you call out a powerful King and don't have your own army to back you up, chances are the King is probably going to win the argument in the end.

I bring up the story of John the Baptist because I believe he makes an interesting comparison to the Stephen we read about today. Both are martyred for their beliefs, scapegoats if you will. But there is one crucial difference between them that makes all the difference. Jesus, when queried about John the Baptist, says of him in the 11th chapter of the gospel of Matthew says that, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet *the least* in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Both John and Stephen were killed for their beliefs in the most unjust of manners. However, in the case of John the Baptist, his vehement indictments of King Herod's personal life, like a character flaw of one of the tragic heroes of mythology, created an atmosphere where forgiveness could find no place to enter into the equation.

So toxic an atmosphere was created between the two that no middle ground could be found, and what started as a honest call of repentance, ended in a cycle of violence and hostility that spiraled out of control. Reconciliation failed because neither person in the end could see the other's humanity, and John the Baptist lost his head because of it. The animosity was so great between the two that the death of John the Baptist did not solve the matter; it made the matter worse because the cycle of animosity then became unresolvable. So much so that some time later, when Jesus comes onto the scene and begins teaching and doing various miracles, Herod has become so paranoid that he begins to believe that Jesus is John the Baptist who has come back from the dead to haunt him and take revenge, all because two pious, law abiding Jews could not find a way to end their hostility.

The same pitfall almost happens to Saint Stephen in today's reading from Acts. In the first lectionary reading today, we only get the last 6-verse climax of a 2-chapter saga concerning Stephen. I urge you to spend some time this week in your personal private time to read over those two chapters, particularly the beginning of Chapter 6 on how St. Stephen is introduced and the ending we get today.

Stephen appears in the beginning of Chapter 6 the midst of a minor church squabble over, of all things, *food*. In the early church, as is common in churches nowadays, the church basically ran a soup kitchen to help provide for the members of the community who did not have enough food. And as is also sometimes the case nowadays, the clergy in the beginning of chapter 6 are scrambling to find some lay members to help in such a ministry because... well, you read what it says in verse 2, they are too busy praying and writing sermons apparently.

Stephen is one of seven chosen for this otherwise seemingly menial task. Stephen is not a man who was one of the 12 disciples; he was not ordained, nor did he have any specific theological training. He was just a everyday member of the community.

And yet this man, not Peter nor Paul nor Mary the Mother of Jesus nor any of the other Lions of the early church that we generally tend to see enshrined in stained glass windows, was the one who became the first martyr of the whole of Christianity. It was not any of these people, it was an everyday “lay” member of a local church who probably had an everyday job, someone who volunteered to work at the community soup kitchen. It was a man such as this (a worker in a soup kitchen) who became the first great witness to the faith in the early church.

With that background, what made the difference between John the Baptist's religious conflict and differences with King Herod and Stephen's conflict with the angry mob that is bent on killing him over his religious beliefs? Both men ended up dead, martyrs for what they believed in.

And Stephen, after he is arrested by the mob, preaches a sermon that makes up the majority of Chapter 7, and for the majority of that sermon, he seems to fall into the same trap that ensnared John the Baptist in the end: an indictment that what has befallen him is completely the fault of the other side: that is to say, '*They started it!*' as if his rather incendiary sermon at the end calling his accusers 'murderers of the prophets' had absolutely nothing to do with inflaming the situation in which Stephen finds himself.

Calling people names (regardless of whether it is true or not) is never really effective in winning people over. But the difference, my friends, is that in the end, Stephen remembers the revelation of forgiveness that comes from Jesus Christ, and I believe Stephen recalled the way he began his ministry: not as a lofty ordained person with grandiose dogmatic ideals, but as a mere servant, a worker who waited tables at a soup kitchen serving the poorest in the community.

In remembering that act of serving others, Stephen, at the end, chose not to continue to be a justified victim who had every right to continue the cycle of violence until his dying breath, but chose to hear the very words that we got from the Gospel this morning, that “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the *works* that I do.” Works like the washing of his own disciples feet, works like forgiving those who persecuted and killed him. Works that show *us* the way of truth and life, not the way of vengeance and death.

Stephen died doing what Jesus did, something that John the Baptist did not: praying for forgiveness, both for himself and his community. He remembered that his vocation, his “call” if you will, was not to a vocation of “being right” or to a vocation of “winning every moral argument” but to a vocation of reconciliation.

May God give us all such grace, and may we learn that lesson of our own vocation so that, as it says in the collect today, “we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life...”

AMEN.