

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
April 18, 2021

Greetings brothers and sisters in Christ.

HE IS RISEN!! HE IS RISEN INDEED!! ALLELUIA!!

We are planning to begin OUTSIDE in-person worship on the parking lot on May 2nd at 10:30 a.m. (weather permitting). Masks and social distancing will be required. Bring your lawn chair. When you arrive, you will be directed to park your car in a designated space. After you park your car, place your lawn chair where you would like to sit. Then, go to the table to pick up a bulletin, a communion kit (choice of grape juice or wine) and place your offering in the plate.

We are excited about gathering in-person again and we ask you to be considerate of other's needs at this time. This transition back to being together may cause a great deal of anxiety for some people. So, although you may be fully vaccinated and/or may be comfortable being a little more lax with the CDC guidelines; there will be those there on Sunday morning that are not. So, please for the sake of others who are working through their anxiety adhere to CDC guidelines of wearing your mask properly (with your nose covered), maintain the 6 ft separation from others who are not family members, and do not engage in any physical contact (hand-shaking or hugs). We want this outside sanctuary to be a place where all people who choose to attend feel they can participate safely.

The witness committee will be selling pinwheels to benefit Family Promise in May. This is a partnership with Thrivent Financial. We have purchased the pinwheels with a grant from Thrivent and will be selling them for \$2.00. All the proceeds will be donated to the ministry of Family Promise, which provides housing for those who are homeless.

If you have prayer requests, please send them to me so that I can include them in my weekly newsletters.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Denise

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Acts 6 and 7

A reading from the 6th and 7th verses of Acts beginning at the 1st verse.

6 ¹⁻⁴ During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers ... toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines.

So, the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, “It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor.

So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we’ll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we’ll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God’s Word.”

⁵⁻⁶ The congregation thought this was a great idea. They went ahead and chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit (and six

others). Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid hands (on them) and commissioned them for their task. ...

⁸⁻¹⁰ Stephen, brimming with God’s grace and energy, was doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them.

But then some men from the meeting place whose membership was made up of freed slaves ... went up against Stephen trying to argue him down. But they were no match for his wisdom and spirit when he spoke.

¹¹ So in secret they bribed men to lie: “We heard him cursing Moses and God.”

¹²⁻¹⁴ That stirred up the people, the religious leaders, and religion scholars. They grabbed Stephen and took him before the High Council. They put forward their bribed witnesses to testify: “This

man talks nonstop against this Holy Place and God's Law. We even heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth would tear this place down and throw out all the customs Moses gave us."

¹⁵ As all those who sat on the High Council looked at Stephen, they found they couldn't take their eyes off him. His face was like the face of an angel!

7 Then the Chief Priest said, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

²⁻³ Stephen replied, "Friends, fathers, and brothers, and (began to tell the stories of their ancestors beginning with Abraham of how God worked through them to restore God's people, but they resisted and at times rejected that which God had presented to them. Stephen ended his orations by saying you are) deliberately ignoring the Holy Spirit, you're just like your ancestors.

⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ At that point they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles

and criticism. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—he only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing at his side. He said, "Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God's side!"

⁵⁷⁻⁵⁸ Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them.

⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰ As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life." Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Master, don't blame them for this sin"—his last words. Then he died.

L: The word of the Lord.

C: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father
and Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. AMEN.

Let us pray.

Holy Giver and Receiver of life,
Your martyr, Stephen, shined
with the light of your Holy
Spirit. When his opponents took
his life, he offered up his spirit to
you, and prayed mercy for theirs.
Make Stephen an example of
faith and courage for all your
followers, for
the sake of the one who brought
light and life to this world, Jesus
Christ. Amen.

This morning text moves us on
chronologically from Easter day,
past the arrival of the Holy
Spirit and onto the early days of
the Christian church.

And just as the two disciples
from last week's Gospel came
back to Jerusalem to share the

good news that they had
encountered the risen Christ, the
news of what God had done
through Jesus is being shared
throughout the country and the
number of disciples was
increasing in leaps and bounds.
With the Holy Spirit now
dwelling within them, those who
were preaching were inspired
and energized; while at the same
time those who came to hear, the
Holy Spirit opened their hearts
and minds and they became
believers and followers.

And although the growth was
amazing, the young church was
not without its challenges. In
this morning's text, we hear that
in the zealotry to proclaim
the gospel, the apostles have
been neglecting some of their
responsibilities with regard to

taking care of providing food and support for the widows.

The leaders met to figure out how they could continue their evangelism efforts, while at the same time take care of the widows. It was decided that they would appoint seven men, who were known to be filled with the Holy Spirit to take on this responsibility. They chose Stephen and six other members and appointed them to serve in the ministry of feeding and supporting the widows or their community.

In order to fulfill their responsibilities, these seven men of service found themselves going out in the community to where the widows resided.

And so in addition to feeding the widows, Stephen was inspired by the Holy Spirit to also preach the good news and in doing so at times revealed that their ancestors had been resistant to God's call to change their ways.

When some of the others heard what Stephen was doing in addition to his work of providing food for the widows, they confronted Stephen and demanded that he stop telling the people that their ancestors had turned away from God. And when Stephen did not stop challenging people move on from some of the practices and traditions to live into the future that was in-line with what Jesus had revealed to them; the disgruntled group began to tell lies about what Stephen was saying and doing until word reached the elders of the community. And Stephen was summoned to the Council to explain himself.

And in doing so, he began to tell the Council how even back as far as Father Abraham, God was calling them to restore the world back to wholeness. God was leading them to live in ways that would bring new life, healing and restoration of dignity for all people, but they resisted. And

throughout their history, time and time again there were examples of their people neglecting God's call to work for restoration of peace among all God's people. Stephen gave examples of how God acted and God's chosen people pushed back. He went on to say that they were still resisting God's call to move on as they were still doing the same things that their forefathers had done. That is, they were turning away from where God's spirit was leading them.

This so angered the crowd that a wild violent mob formed and they began shouting at Stephen. They grabbed Stephen and drug him out of town and stoned him until he died. And in Stephen's last words, we hear words reminiscent of Jesus' last words of forgiveness. As Stephen says "Master, don't blame them for this sin."

So, Stephen is killed by his own people for following the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth about how their past behaviors and traditions fell short of the ways of the kingdom that Jesus revealed to us.

I heard in Stephen's message a challenge to the leaders of his day and to us today to evaluate our current practices using the standards of the kingdom that Jesus revealed to all of us in his life, death and resurrection.

This was a hard thing for this faith community to embrace for it was no longer "the way that they had always done things" that was going to direct their future. Freed from the burden of sin and no longer in charge of their own righteousness to earn God's favor, they now needed to rethink some of their practices and traditions.

Because, through the faithfulness of Jesus our relationship with God has been made "right" and we are now called to make "right" our

relationship with our neighbor, regardless of their status, their nationality, the physical, mental and emotional health, their beliefs, their choices, or their past.

And it's hard to hear that the past that we idolize and refer to as the "good old days" doesn't always measure up to the kingdom standards that Jesus taught us about.

And indeed, we can't change the past, but like Stephen we can first of all acknowledge that there are things from our past that fall short of the ways of the kingdom and then more importantly let those things go

and move on. And trust that inspired, empowered and energized by the Holy Spirit the work and the actions that are needed for us today to move on toward the creation of the kingdom here on Earth that God has always intended for us will be brought to light.

For God's mission for the restoration of all of God's people has not yet been accomplished. Jesus set us right with God, it is now our challenge to work to set ourselves right with one another.

AMEN

Blessing

May

The love of God,

The light of Christ,

And the joy of the Holy Spirit

Abide with you on this day

and forever more.

AMEN