

May 14, 2017
"Categorical"

(5th Sunday of Easter) (Mother's Day)

John 14:1-14; Acts 7:55-60

We can be sure of this: God's expectations of us are high and God's Spirit couldn't be closer.

We've moved from Holy Week to the tyranny of the Cross, to the wonder of the resurrection, to the appearances of Jesus, the transformation of the disciples, and the growth of the Church. Now we, the Church, are faced with a stark choice: will we live as followers, disciples, of Jesus Christ or won't we?

If we're honest, that choice is easier for us than for others. Disciples at the time of the Roman occupation were under the threat of death, from the Romans as well as their own countrymen and leaders. Disciples in some parts of the world are under the onerous provision that following Christ is illegal, even punishable with prison.

The choice for us to be disciples in our country is not a choice that threatens our mortality. Does that make our version of faith (that is, in our present-day) less authentic than our forebears? What is really required for us to be categorically and undeniably Christian?

**Who are
you in
Christ
really?**



John 14:1-14

1 "Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. **2** My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? **3** When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. **4** You know the way to the place I'm going."

5 Thomas asked, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **7** If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him."

8 Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us."

9 Jesus replied, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? **10** Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don't speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. **11** Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves. **12** I assure you that whoever believes in

me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father. **13** I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. **14** When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.

- v.6 has often been invoked to challenge the validity of other religions. But **to whom** is Jesus speaking? What the is the purpose of what Jesus is saying here?
- What do you make of v.14? Is Jesus claiming to be a giant ATM? Or even, metaphorically, an ATM of faith?
- What's the biggest thing with which you've trusted God?



Acts 7:55-60

55 But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. **56** He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One[a] standing at God's right side!" **57** At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, **58** threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. **59** As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" **60** Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

Footnotes:

Acts 7:56 Or "Son of Man"

- The violence Stephen suffered seems senseless and (hopefully) shocking. Do we *really* experience anything comparable to this level of persecution in the United States?
- Who's response sounds similar to Stephen's in v.60 (hint: died on a cross)? For what are you willing to give your life? Do you think you could forgive as Stephen did?
- For all the themes the Bible talks about, *forgiveness* is by far the most prominent. While that may not necessarily mean its the most important, we should at least be paying attention to it.

Commentary on John 14:6 by Mark Davis

[http://](http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/05/incarnational-truth-v-propositional.html)

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John 14:6 is often understood as expressing that Jesus is the only means to salvation, via the words, "I am the way and the truth and the life" followed by "No one comes to the father except through me." I understand why one would read this verse primarily as an indicator of the exclusiveness of salvation through Christ, but I want to posit that something else is at stake in these words....



...When Jesus speaks of “the way and the truth and the life” is he not speaking of esoteric knowledge, memorized scriptures, or any other ‘subject-object’ relationship. He is the embodiment of the way and the truth and the life. To know ‘the way and the truth and the life’ is to meet Jesus, a ‘subject-subject’ relationship, where I do not lose my subjectivity and yet ‘the way and the truth and the life’ also has subjectivity....My point is that *incarnational* truth may be different in kind from doctrinal, propositional, or *conceptual* truth. So often, when I hear people read and apply this passage in terms of its exclusivity – that Jesus is the only way to salvation – what they are really saying is ‘this doctrine about Jesus is the truth.’ That is not the same as saying ‘Jesus is the truth.’...

Jesus’ frustration with Thomas and Philip is that they keep asking about the way the truth and the life as if the way the truth and the life were something other than the very Jesus standing before them. I think this same dynamic is at work in Jesus’ conversation with Martha in John 11 after Lazarus’ death, when Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Perhaps at the heart of all of John’s “I am” statements is this insistence that Jesus really is the way, the truth, the life, the resurrection, the bread of life, the gate to the sheepfold, etc., not that he tells us about those things.

Commentary on Acts passage by John Holbert

<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Horrific-Tale-John-Holbert-05-10-2014>

Of all the stories in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, this is the one I most try to avoid. I find it nothing less than savage and bestial, a horrifying amalgam of anti-Judaism and barbaric blood lust. The fact that in our twenty-first century world execution by stoning is still practiced is a living reminder of the monstrous cruelty that such an act represents. To hurl rocks at a living human being, slowly stripping off greater and smaller pieces of flesh, crushing bones in legs, arms, and face, creating wounds in too many places to number, suggests to me a torture whose horror is literally beyond anything I can conceive. The sheer intimacy of the deed, its slice-by-slice decimation of a living body, the sound of stone hitting flesh—surely no person with any shred of humanity could participate in such a ritual murder.

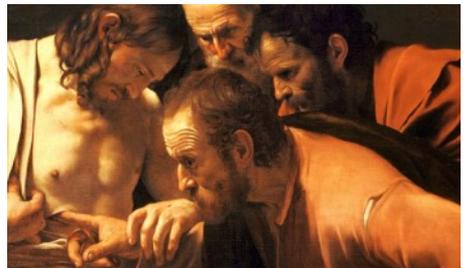
But of course human beings did—and do—just that. Leviticus 24; among too many other texts, describes stoning as the only appropriate punishment for blasphemy. The Hebrew Bible is riddled with the ritual of stoning for any number of

crimes, from being a wizard (Lev 20:27) to being caught as a thief (Joshua 7:25). And in our own time, women have suffered the fate of stoning in cultures that abhor sexual relationships that transcend some established norm. When the Taliban had free sway over large parts of Afghanistan they often used the fear of stoning to keep women, especially, in line with their rigid views of the world. Stoning is an obscene way to die, staining with blood the victim and staining with shame those who hoist the stones.

The Jews stone Stephen to death. They refuse to hear his sermon that has been directed toward them and their murder of the Messiah Jesus. Echoing Peter's Pentecost address, Stephen excoriates his listeners in terms perhaps even more brutal and nasty than those employed by the fisherman disciple himself. Not only does he pin the murder of Jesus squarely on their shoulders (Acts 7:52), but he claims that this latest murder of an anointed prophet is merely another in a long line of "murders," not always physical ones but always assaults against the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). In fact, Jewish history may be summed up in this appalling phrase: "You stiff-necked people (Stephen here aligns the ancestors of Israel with the pharaohs of Egypt, those monarchs who enslaved them for centuries), uncircumcised in heart and ears

**"And yet He said not,
Greater works than
these shall ye do, to
lead us to suppose
that it was only the
apostles who would
do so."**

**–Tractate 71
(Augustine
on John 14)**



(using their own distinctive physical ritual against them), you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:51-52). The murder of Jesus was nothing more than another example of the monstrosity of these Jews who can do nothing but kill those who have come to challenge and finally to save them.

Little wonder that the Jewish audience of this disgusting diatribe refuse to listen to such twaddle, stopping their ears in rage, and rushing to shut Stephen's mouth. I write that last sentence from the viewpoint of the Jews, of course. Why should they listen to such a one-sided, cruel, and bigoted assessment of their own history? Are there not other ways to read the history of Israel? Are there not other explanations of why Jesus dies on the cross beyond a massive indictment of the Jews? Just as Peter's Pentecost sermon cost many Jews through the centuries much pain and death, so has Stephen's hate-filled attack on them and their forebears led to suffering beyond recounting, and in nearly every country of the world.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

God didn't promise a conceptual Exodus: Israel tromped across the Red Sea.

God didn't promise a conceptual Promised Land: Joshua led them into it.

God didn't promise a conceptual Christ: Jesus died on a cross and is risen.

God didn't promise a conceptual Church: God's Spirit resides within us.

What about your faith is NOT conceptual?

I can easily see what Luke is about in his telling of this story. Stephen is redoing what Jesus has done already in his passion in the gospel. He works signs and wonders among the people (Acts 6:8); he disputes those who challenge him (6:9); he is arrested (6:12); he is brought to trial before the Sanhedrin (6:12-15); he is taken outside of the city for execution (7:58); there is a division of clothing (7:58), though not his own as it was with Jesus; he prays that his spirit may be received (7:59); he asks forgiveness for his murderers (7:60); he is buried by pious people (8:2). The major difference between the passion and death of Jesus and that of Stephen is of course that Jesus is silent in the face of his accusers while Stephen offers his long and angry sermon diatribe against those who kill him. To me, that fact makes his call for forgiveness of them rather hollow; they are killers, he claims, because they have always been killers. Can forgiveness genuinely be expected for such unrepentant reprobates?

I can see no way to soft-pedal the dread and shock of this story. When read in isolation from the longer story of Acts, it quite literally sickens me. This is true not only because of the brutality of stoning which is quite repulsive on its own, but also because of the terror of the sermon of Stephen, laden as it is with

intemperance and cruelty. What is a preacher to do?

The tiny light in the story appears in vs 58, though it hardly is light at this point in the tale. "The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." This first mention of the great missionary apostle whom we will later know as Paul forces us to take seriously what happens to this particular man as the narrative unfolds. In 8:1 we are told that this Saul "approved of their killing of him," with the possible implication that Saul himself may have had a hand in instigating the entire event. Of course, in chapter 9 this Saul will have his life turned upside down by a visit from the murdered Jesus himself, and as a result of that visitation will become the apostle to the gentiles, opening the gospel message to many "even to the ends of the earth."

And it will be this Paul who will give to the world his anguished concern for his Jewish brothers and sisters who have refused to accept that this same Jesus is in fact their Messiah. In Romans 9-11 Paul will struggle with that refusal with genuine pain. Unlike the rancor and bitterness of Peter and Stephen, the apostle Paul will pray that his Jewish friends will see those wonderful ways of the new Christians and will feel deeply their desire to join in. For Paul eventually

all Israel will find its way into the arms of Christ Jesus (Rom 11:33-36)....

Additional Thoughts

- The purpose of stoning was not simply capital punishment. It was a public shaming and warning against anyone doing what the stoning victim did. What does stoning look like nowadays? What have you done to stand against such activities?
- What is the most real thing about your faith?
- What qualities of motherhood does God embody? What about you?
- Gossip or verbal abuse are just words, however strongly conveyed. What makes their impact so powerful?

