

**“Looking Back
On the Journey Ahead”**

Sunday, June 28, 2009

Rev. Tom Ott

*145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269-965-1225
www.fccb.org*

June 28, 2009

Acts 7:51-60
Looking Back on the Journey Ahead

This morning we heard the final words of Steven, the first Christian martyr. He was stoned to death for blasphemy by a group of religious fanatics, led by a man named Saul who believed that Steven's testimony about Jesus was corrupting the faith of their ancestors.

Steven's death marked an important turning point in the first church. As news of his brutal murder spread throughout Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus fled the Holy City and scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. But as they spread out from Jerusalem, so did the gospel of Jesus Christ. The book of Acts begins with Jesus telling his followers, "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." It took the tragedy of Steven's death and the persecutions that followed to motivate the first church to take up its mission of spreading the gospel throughout the world.

But Steven is remembered today, not because of the way he died; but because of the way he lived. His story is an important story for us because he reminds us that the character of our faith is defined, not by the prayers we pray or the hymns we sing when we gather here in this place, but by the life we live and the service we

render when we leave this place and live out our faith in daily life.

Steven was not an apostle. He was never a member of Jesus' revered inner circle. His name isn't even mentioned in any of the gospels. He didn't have a prestigious title or office in the first church. He was just an ordinary member of the faith community in Jerusalem.

Today we would call Steven a "layman," or perhaps a "deacon." He and six other people were commissioned by the apostles to oversee the distribution of food to widows living in Jerusalem. The first church had been experiencing some early growing pains. They had grown so fast that they didn't have the structure in place to make sure that everyone was cared for. You may remember that one of the defining characteristics of the first church was their commitment to share their resources with each other so that no one ever had to go in need. But the apostles had received a complaint that the widows of the Greek-speaking Jews were being neglected. Steven and six other members of the faith community were appointed by the apostles and commissioned to correct that problem. They were chosen because of their strong faith and good standing in the community. They were people who had earned the respect and confidence of their fellow believers.

How many of you have heard of "Steven's Ministries"? Today churches all across our country send

members of their congregations to be trained as Steven's Ministers. They learn how to do what Steven first did: to care for those in need. They are equipped to strengthen the caring ministries of their churches by visiting the sick and the homebound, supporting people who are grieving, helping people through difficult transitions in their lives, and making sure that everyone's needs are met.

Steven's legacy lives on two thousand years after he was martyred. Today Steven's Ministries is an ecumenical program that equips people to care deeply for others, but its roots go back to the first century church member whose inspiring story is recorded for us in the 6th and 7th chapters of the book of Acts.

When Steven was commissioned by the first church, he took his work very seriously. It wasn't just a job he had been assigned. For Steven, it was holy work; it was the particular form of ministry that he believed God was calling him to serve. If you have ever volunteered to help deliver meals on wheels, or if you have ever taken dinner to someone who is sick or recovering from surgery, you can understand why Steven took his work so seriously. It wasn't just about food distribution. It was a way of caring for people and conveying the love of Christ by providing for their needs. Steven was serving the most vulnerable population in Jerusalem. Widows in the first century had no other source of support. There was

no social security back then. The faith community was the primary care giver for those who had no family to provide for them.

And Steven was good at what he did. The gifts of compassion, kindness, and generosity were evident in the way he lived his life. The text says that Steven was “full of grace and power and did great wonders and signs among the people.”

In fact, Steven was so good at what he did that it got him into trouble. His commitment and dedication to the people he served every day was so powerful that his reputation quickly spread throughout the city. People came from every neighborhood in Jerusalem to meet Steven, and to learn about the faith that motivated him to live such a caring and compassionate life. When religious leaders in the temple heard about it, they became jealous and resentful of Steven’s popularity. Eventually they started a rumor that he had committed blasphemy against the laws of Moses and God. Instead of being recognized and commended for his good works, Steven found himself standing before the council, forced to give an accounting of his faith.

Let’s pause the story there for a moment, to consider what you would say if you were asked to give an accounting of your faith? What is it about your own faith that inspires you to live the life you are living today? I want to encourage you to put pen to paper today when you get home and write

down the convictions of your faith that shape the way you live your life. Then go back and read Steven's inspiring speech before the council that is recorded in Acts, chapter 7.

Steven was a man of deep faith. He knew the stories and traditions of his spiritual forebearers. He had internalized them and incorporated them into his own spiritual identity. For Steven they weren't just stories of people who had lived a long time ago. They were his stories.

From Abraham, Steven learned about the courage to take risks, to set out in faithful obedience to God's call without even knowing where the journey would lead. He learned about perseverance in the face of adversity. He knew that living the life of faith wasn't always easy and didn't always lead to blessings. Sometimes things didn't go according to plan. Abraham had set out for the Promised Land but ended up stopping half way at Haran and settling there for many years while he cared for his aging father. It was only after his father's death that Abraham completed the journey to the Promised Land.

And when he finally did arrive, he discovered that Land of Canaan wasn't flowing with milk and honey. It was a desert! A terrible famine had made the land uninhabitable. Abraham and Sarah had to go down to Egypt and live as refugees at the mercy of others.

From the stories and traditions of his spiritual forbearers, Steven also learned important lessons about human nature. He wasn't naive. He knew how badly even devout people of faith often behaved. He knew that jealousy and pride often provoke violence and hostility. He knew the stories of Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his eleven brothers. He knew that prophets who spoke critical words to people in power were rarely thanked or rewarded. They were persecuted, exiled, humiliated, and condemned. He knew that Jesus - whom God had sent into the world to redeem the world in love - had been crucified at the hands of those whom he had called his beloved.

Steven's faith inspired him to follow the way of Jesus. He devoted his life to doing good works that served the needs of the most vulnerable people in his society. He took to heart the teachings of Jesus, "In as much as you have done this unto one of these, the least of my brethren, you have done it unto me."

But Steven's faith also prepared him to face the worst in people with grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The sins of his forebears reminded him of God's persistent love. No matter how often they turned away, God refused to give up on them. Their stories taught Steven that God is gracious and merciful - slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He remembered those stories even as his accusers reached down

to pick up their stones. The last words spoken by the first martyr were nearly identical to the last words that Jesus spoke from the cross: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Today we remember Steven, not because of the way he died, but because of the way he lived. His story reminds us of the importance of knowing our own faith stories. The stories that we internalize and incorporate into our own spiritual identity are the stories that have the power to shape the way we live out our faith in daily life. So think carefully about the stories that you take in and always be ready to give an accounting of your faith. Amen.