

## **Our Mission:**

To share Christ with the world  
and grow disciples for Jesus



## Loving God and Loving Neighbor as Ourselves

### **Background:**

Stephen is called as one of the first deacons. The Apostles had too much on their plates as evangelists to provide for the daily needs of this growing community. Yet, Stephen whose task was to serve, was not reticent to make his testimony before others. After being brought before the Sanhedrin on trumped up charges, he outlines how it is that Jesus is the fulfillment of ancient texts. He concludes with an outright attack on the temple, proclaiming Jesus is God's correction for a system that has been corrupted. In doing so, he becomes the first recorded Christian martyr (witness).

### **Theology Connection:**

The Book of Acts is Luke's second volume detailing the work of the Holy Spirit. What we see in today's text is how the church embodies the mission of Jesus. Stephen is called to serve, for Jesus calls us to serve. Stephen gives his testimony because we are all called to be witnesses of the Good News. Persecuted and stoned to death, Stephen prays that his tormentors be forgiven, for we are called to a ministry of reconciliation.

### **Application:**

We are reminded in this account of Stephen that there is no ministry that is too small. Acts of service offered as a witness to Christ are just as needful as well as meaningful as a well worded sermon. Everyone has a place in the community of Christ. We are all called to utilize our God-given gifts and talents to witness to God's better world. What gifts has God given you? How are you utilizing them for God's purposes?

### **The Text: Acts 6: 8-7: 3, 51-60**

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

<sup>12</sup> So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. <sup>13</sup> They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. <sup>14</sup> For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

<sup>15</sup> All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

<sup>7</sup> Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

<sup>2</sup> To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran.

<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup> Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— <sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

<sup>54</sup> When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

<sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

## ADULT

Normally we would have just finished with 'tax season.' For many of us it is a sigh of relief when we get our returns into the IRS. Yet, tax season is a chance to make an accounting. When we look over the past year, how has your investment in God's work worked out for you? Might this be a time to make an accounting, to re-think our engagement with Christ's mission and the fellowship of believers?

## YOUTH

Please read Acts 6: 8-7:3, 51-60

In this bible passage, Stephen faithfully spoke the good news of Jesus and was stoned because of it. But he was not alone as he suffered. He saw Jesus waiting for him in heaven. Stephen left his life on earth and went to heaven. It is comforting to know that the Holy Spirit is in all of our hearts and we too are not alone. We too will be in heaven with Jesus someday. We can do and face anything that comes our way because we have Jesus in our hearts helping to guide us.

Do you think this passage had a sad ending?

What was Stephen doing that made the religious leaders jealous?

Are there still places today where people can get in trouble for believing in Jesus?

Let us pray:

Dear God, today we pray for you to give us the courage to share the good news and to stand up for Jesus. Please help us stay faithful and strong. In your sons' holy name Amen.

## CHILDREN'S

The young church kept growing. Every day more people came to learn about Jesus. The apostles were kept busy teaching and encouraging the new believers. All kinds of people joined the church. Some were rich, some were poor, others lost their jobs, or their families didn't want anything to do with them when they turned to Christ. They all tried to help each other. The rich sold some of their property and used the money to buy food for those who didn't have any. People were busy with teaching and preaching and didn't think much about other things.

One day, the Greek-speaking Jews came to the apostles and started complaining. Everyone was shocked and upset. Until then, there was a feeling of unity among the believers. The Greek-speaking Jews said, "The Greek-speaking widows aren't getting as much food as the widows who speak Hebrew." The 12 apostles gathered all the believers together and said, "If we took time from teaching the Word of God to serve food, we wouldn't be doing what God has called us to do. Choose 7 men who are wise and full of the Spirit, and we will ask them to be responsible for caring for these matters." The believers chose Stephen, Phillip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, all good, kind, Spirit-filled men.

1. Why were the Greek-speaking Jews complaining?
2. What was the apostles' solution?

Pray:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for giving us Your Word, so that we may learn more about You. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!