

“Conversion, Not Coercion”

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr
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December 26, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Chronicles 24:17-22; Psalm 17:1-9, 15
Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60; Matthew 23:34-39

Grace to you and peace, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“That’s all there is to it,” said the Iraqi sitting behind the steering wheel of a truck. “That’s all there is to it. Just a button.”

So reads a quote reported in yesterday’s Patriot News. The words are spoken by an Iraqi insurgent, a terrorist, called by so many – a martyr. The scene is part of a video designed to recruit idealistic young men and women to join the Iraqi insurgents who bill themselves as martyrs.

Martyr is a role with which most of us are unfamiliar. I’m sure many of us have heard the stories of the Saints who were martyred for their faith. In fact, some of their stories make pretty exciting reading. And it is true, in the history of the Christian faith, that there is a long list of faithful followers who had their lives snuffed out because of their faithful witness. In fact, that’s what martyr means – witness – it is a Greek word that has been adopted into our language like nectar, ambrosia, and cinema. So we, as Christians, are called to be martyrs – witnesses.

This is particularly true this morning. Bailey Meganne and Mark Edward, although they don’t realize it yet, have been drafted as martyrs – as witnesses of the living Christ, Son of the loving God, who, with the Holy Spirit is part of the triune God that we worship.

Do you remember what you just said in greeting to Bailey and Mark? “We welcome you into the Lord’s family. We receive you as fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers with us in the Kingdom of God.” In other words – fellow witnesses. Sorry, mom and dad, martyrs, if you will, for Christ.

Now, being a witness for Christ is something like being in the armed forces. I guess the kids have just been drafted. They didn’t have a choice. Neither Bailey nor Mark were consulted, I’m pretty sure. If they were, they weren’t quite sure what they were being asked. So, just like the draft, being called up, there they were dunked, oiled, and set free.

So it is when you join the armed forces. There are all sorts of noble motives for joining the services. Like serving the nation, maintaining the peace, bringing security and freedom to the world. And there are more personal motives. Signing up to benefit from the order and structure of the services. To help oneself find a grounding in living and being. To develop skills and abilities that might lead to a future career. And although that serving may be personally dangerous, with the prospect of being injured and handicapped, and the chance of dying, I don’t think anybody signs up for the armed services with the intention of being killed. Do you?

So it is for us as Christians. Serving our Lord calls for a great deal. It may certainly involve risk. And yes, for some faithful servants it's going to involve their lives. But I don't think we get baptized in order to have ourselves killed for Christ's sake. But following Christ as a disciple, as a witness, as a martyr, if you will, can be very costly, indeed. It's because being a witness to Christ can become so costly, that the church moves immediately from the celebration of Christmas to the immediate consideration of those who served with everything they had, even to the extent of giving their lives. December 26 is always St. Stephen's Day. The 27th, St. John of Patmos Day, and December 28th, the Holy Innocents Day, remembering the innocent infants that Herod slew in order to protect his throne.

If it wasn't this way, that we were called to be witnesses, that witnessing could be costly, if it were not so, the grace we receive from God, the forgiveness, the promise of life we receive, would be very cheap, indeed. In fact, it would require next to nothing from us. But the cost of that grace, the cost to God to bring that grace to us, was exceptional indeed – His only Son, Christ. Jesus suffered and died not only for us, but to set us free from the bonds of sin and death.

This tiny baby, whose birth we celebrated yesterday, bore faithful witness to a God who loves us. To a God only too willing to set us free from the bondage of sin and death, by suffering and dying in our place for us. A witness, which he reminded his disciples, and through the scriptures reminds us, that we are also to take up our cross if we're to follow him. That we are to take up our witnessing however costly it may be. Serving him in the world by living out the covenant of our baptism with him.

That's just the way St. Stephen lived out his faithful discipleship. His witness was simply to speak out, to tell the story of all that God had done, and showing a fallen people the reality of their situation, and calling them to repent and follow the Messiah, Christ the Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom they had crucified.

He spoke boldly, out of the depths of his faith, and he called it exactly as he saw it. And, like John the Baptist, called those to whom he spoke to return to the ways of God. He didn't ask to die. He didn't want to die. But, when it came to it, he was put to death, and he bore the witness. He didn't sit silently – he spoke.

How different this is from the sort of follower the video tape reported in the Patriot sought to attract. The Iraqi in the truck, sitting behind the wheel with the detonating button which will ignite the explosives in the truck, looks into the camera and says, "That's all there is to it. Just a button. Then you leave this world after you have paid your dues to God." The truck drives off, goes near a checkpoint and explodes.

Here the intent is clear. To create suicidal insurgents, presented as martyrs for Allah, whose sole purpose is to kill, maim and destroy, and in so doing create a coercive fear that will cause people to be subservient to them.

It is because of this trend that martyrdom these days gets to be so misunderstood. Yes, it is true, that martyrs died for their faith, but they die to bring freedom and life, not coercion, and not death. They die, as did Stephen, forgiving those who persecute them and put them to death. Not screaming hatred and cursing those they oppose. They die most often, real martyrs that is, because they

express their conviction. They speak from the depths of their faith and it is their speaking, their testimony, their bearing witness, that so frequently gets them into deep water and trouble, not their violent actions.

They speak the truth about Christ as they address the conditions which surround them. And, finally, like all true martyrs, they are willing to die, but they don't to. They don't feel compelled to. They don't wish to make that the high point of their lives. Their purpose is not to die in making their point, but to be prepared to die if that's the ultimate price they must pay for their open and honest witness.

Most importantly, the Christian witness seeks to persuade, to lead a person to Christ for forgiveness, for life, for the promise of life after death. They aim to convert people, not to coerce them. The Christian witness makes bold to speak of their understanding of the faith, not as the ultimate and only authority, but with the sincerity and compassion helping others to understand what it is the witness has experienced. It is the simple, honest, caring, sharing of faith with all those with whom we meet when the time seems both right and appropriate. It doesn't call us to judge others and condemn them for their actions. It doesn't call us to drive the world to follow the Christian way. It doesn't call us to stand on the corner of Market Street, flourishing a Bible and shouting at the top of our voice that everybody out there is doomed to the fires of hell. It simply asks us to share with compassion and honesty how we have encountered Christ in our lives, and what God's forgiveness and God's promises have meant to us. Not called to be expert theologians, just called to be open and honest and caring and sharing. What we don't get right in our witness, God will get right for us.

Bailey Meganne and Mark Edward, this is the witness to which you are being called, and for which you'll be prepared. It's the witnessing to which all of us are called. For if we're not prepared to speak, how will God's stories and promises ever be heard?

Today, we commemorate St. Stephen, a deacon in the early church responsible for disbursing money to the widows, the orphans, and the poor. A lay person who was put to death simply for speaking the world. So we're reminded of all those who do not remain silent, but pay the price for speaking about their faith. Even in the Christmas season, and at the beginning of the Jesus story, we cannot forget or dismiss the end of the story about the cross and the crucifixion, and our forgiveness, and our redemption.

Amen.

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