

“Stephen: I See Heaven”

Acts 7:55-60; I Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

**Part III of IV in the sermon series
“THE First Church Family and
OUR First Church Family”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Mother's Day, Easter 5, May 10, 2020, dedicated to all mothers everywhere who will celebrate this Mother's Day for the first time with children born in the past year, for my Mother, Carol Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens, who will celebrate her 92nd birthday May 13 and was born on Mother's Day 1928, to the 2020 Schumacher Award recipients - Sierra Jade Blankenship, Paige Kingsley, Kathryn White, to all the men and women who currently are and have served as deacons at First Church and to the memory of one former deacon, Carl Miller who passed to eternal life May 6th, 2020 for COVID-19 and always to the glory of God!

“Stephen: I See Heaven”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The first martyr of Christian faith was Stephen, one of the first seven Deacons of THE First (Congregational) Church of Jerusalem, circa 33AD. As a deacon, Stephen's job was to serve tables, help out

around the church as needed and care for the poor on the streets of Jerusalem.

But this Deacon is different. Once the Apostle's hands are laid on his head, all the grace and power of baptism in Jesus' name flow into him, he is fired up and ready to go. This Deacon gets it into his heart, mind and spirit that he needs to climb into the pulpit and preach – and so he does.

And when Stephen preaches with power, he gets into trouble for telling the truth. His accusers say he is slandering Moses and God. But he points out that everything he says was first said by Moses and the prophets before after him. Moses accused his people of not worshipping God in spirit and truth. Stephen tells the leaders of the Sanhedrin, *“you have your nerve to charge that I have violated Moses and his law – look at yourselves.”* He focuses his preaching on all the great spiritual forebearers of faith - everyone from Abraham, to Joseph, to Moses and all the way to the current day. He points to the truth of these prophetic men and shows how it is the leaders of the First Century temple, not Jesus and the early disciples, who are being unfaithful to God. Stephen makes the case for Jesus – that he was fulfilling the law and the prophets, and like the prophets before him, Jesus was persecuted unto death.

His sermon seals his doom. He shows people their infidelity to God and they can't bear to hear another word. He sees heaven. He sees Jesus at the right hand of God. Once he sees Jesus side by side with God, and announces that to his gathered accusers, his fate is sealed. **He is as good as dead.**

Stephen is buried in the brutality of death by stoning. While he is being pummeled by stones, Saul a pharisee, who later converts to

Christianity and becomes the Apostle Paul and a martyr as well, stands by approvingly and “*watching over*” the cloaks of those who cast the stones. As he is dying, Stephen paraphrases Psalm 31:5 as he prays, “*LORD Jesus, receive my spirit.*” Then knocked to his knees, with his eyes on heaven, he cries out his last words, “*LORD, do not hold this sin against them.*” The first Christian martyr dies, like Jesus, with forgiveness as his last breath.

In her sermon, “*Blood of Martyrs,*” Barbara Brown Taylor, reflects on martyrdom with these words, “*I do not think you can seek it any more than you can avoid it. I think it just happens sometimes, when people get so wrapped up in living God’s life that they forget to protect themselves.*”

Taylor provides examples of other “*ordinary*” Christians who are martyred in recent history: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Jonathan Myrick Daniels, who worked on voter registration during the Civil Rights era. None of them sought martyrdom. All of them, and all the martyrs before and since, simply lived out the gospel in their particular circumstances, even if it cost them their lives.

The stories of Jesus, Stephen, Dietrich, Oscar and Jonathan have a common thread of uncomfortable truth about what constitutes “*Christian success,*” and what does not. Our “*success*” is not found in converting other people to our way of thinking. Our “*success*” is not found in having the most beautiful church in town. Our “*success*” is not even going out of our way to be kind and generous. In the case of these martyrs of our faith, true “*Christian success*” comes down to telling the truth so clearly that some people want to kill you for it.

Telling the truth does not always end in martyrdom – but it could. While there are many ways, we may seek to change our

surrounding culture and the times we live in, bringing a prophetic voice of critique to anything that harms God's children are really why we have been put here as Christians. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (another martyr of our faith) noted years ago, the church has too often been "*the taillights*" instead of "*the headlights*" in the journey toward justice and righteousness. Taillights can never lead. They only light up when you put on the brakes. It is the headlights that guide us forward in the darkest times.

So, what do you want to be - a headlight or a taillight?

Do you want to speak the truth with love to the injustice and lies of our times or do you want to complain silently when those injustices and lies wreak havoc now and into the future as they remain unaddressed? I encourage us to be truthful and live with the consequences. No time like the present – after all we are living in a global pandemic. Why not start right now?

If you want to do something positive before you speak the truth with love, **wash your hands all the time and wear a mask**. I know masks don't make a great fashion statement. I know that masks look scary to some and stupid to others. I also know that masks decrease and, in most cases, cease the spread of COVID-19. I know that masks protect me from harming you and you from harming me. I would rather spread this truth than spread "*the sickness*" as my grandsons call it.

I wear a mask for two reasons. I want to protect my wife, the mother of my children, who is at risk in at least four categories for COVID-19. And I want to hold my granddaughter in my arms for the first time and my grandsons once again – after 72 days of being separated from them – boys I have spent tons of time with at least

every 14 days for 5 years. These are clear and simple motivations for me.

If you and I die from COVID-19, unless are *“so wrapped up in living God’s life that we forget to protect ourselves,”* we are not martyrs, we are victims of our own actions and a deadly virus on the loose.

Wear a mask. Make it as pretty as possible (or don’t) but wear a mask everywhere you go outside your homes. Always. Everywhere. Save your life and save the life of others!

I want you all to live through this pandemic. I feel this more strongly than ever before in the wake of our first loss of a beloved member to COVID-19. Carl Miller died on Wednesday May 6th in Riverside Hospital’s ICU after five days of battling the micro-biotic terrorist. Sadly, Carl joined the 80,000+ Americans who have died from COVID-19. Carl was 82. Thanks be to God for Carl Miller.

The truth is - our American death toll to COVID-19 is a travesty of justice. Although we make up only 4.25% of the world’s population, the United States of America now makes up over 28% of the deaths from COVID-19. 6% of all Americans testing positive are dying from this virus -the highest global percentage.

These numbers need not have happened. This is an indictment on how our nation’s leaders have handled this pandemic. Like a hurricane coming for the coastline, we knew this pandemic was heading our way. There is really no excuse for not properly warning our population, not making enough provisions, not disciplining ourselves to deal with death at our doorstep, and so much more. Now, there is absolutely no excuse whatsoever for treating this lightly. This is not a game. It is not a joke. It is a killer. As Daniel my stand-

up comedian son in quarantine in Queens, New York says, *“there is nothing funny about COVID-19.”*

In the midst of this global pandemic, there are other TRUTHS that need to be acknowledged and dealt with. With the unemployment rate skyrocketing to 14.7 percent last month, the result of the loss of 20.5 million jobs because of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are in trouble with a rising economic crisis. The people who were vulnerable before COVID-19 have been joined by millions more who have become vulnerable in the last eight weeks. Each month our Good Samaritan team fields 50-70 calls. In May they had over 290 calls. They finally had to stop because we don't have enough resources to help all these newly in need neighbors. Good Sam is trying to mercifully help.

There is one group – of which we are all apart – that has not lost track of the rising vulnerability of our brothers and sisters in Franklin County. That group is BREAD – Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity – of which we have been a part for over 20 years as 40 congregations of Christians and Jews continue to join together to do justice. Before the pandemic hit, well over 54,000 low-income families were spending more than half of their income on housing. These families who were working at fast-food restaurants, grocery stores and as home health care aides were already struggling. They are single parents, adults with disabilities, recent college graduates and senior citizens. In fact, before the pandemic, 6 out of 10 of the most common jobs in Columbus, paid too little to feed a family of 3 without receiving food assistance.

To truly assist the 54,000 – now growing by tens of thousands – will take at least \$100 million a year in assistance and laws to protect those

who falling behind on rent. We have a plan to press on tackling this audacious problem. We will reveal our increased and intensified plan on Tuesday night at 7 pm on the 2020 Zoomamiah Action (so named by my wife – Susan Sitler). I invite you to join us. All are welcome.

Housing **AND Gun Violence** are the two issues that BREAD will address on Tuesday night. While most crimes have been down during the pandemic, one which continues unabated is the deadly shooting in our neighborhoods. Gun Violence continues this year on the same ugly pace of claiming lives as it did in 2019. Gun violence has not gone away.

As my friend Cantor Jack Chomsky said in ZOOM services at Tifereth Israel on Friday night: *“We see Gun violence, too often, as short vignettes of neighborhood shootings – one person in one of several Columbus neighborhoods using a gun on another. It is senseless. It destroys lives. It destroys hope and confidence. And every one of these is a full human experience. Until it isn’t. And then we see it, most of the time, as just a short paragraph in the Metro section. Every day.”*

Our plan is to save at least 40 lives a year in Columbus Ohio. In Columbus, we already HAVE the Safe Neighborhoods Initiative in place from BREAD’s 2016 action. The BREAD Gun Violence Research Committee is urging strengthening this program by coordinating it under the National Network for Safe Neighborhoods recommended Group Violence Intervention Strategy. Simply put, some cities across the country are using proven strategies to encourage young men to give up the violent lifestyles and the cheap, easily accessed guns which kill.

The 2-year contract for tightening up the data analysis and teaching a coordinated strategy to intervene is \$370,000. The estimated

community cost of a murder ranges from \$2.5 - \$17 million. Saving 40 lives a year to murder multiplied by \$2.5 million for each death means saving \$100 million for Columbus. That's \$370,000 to save \$100 million. Oh no – wait. TWO years at a cost of \$370,000 to save \$200 million and 80 lives.

Do you think that's a worthwhile investment? I do. Some of those we've been working with in the City of Columbus do as well. Assistant Safety Director, George Speakes, who will appear at the Zoomamiah Action, does. Can we work this lifesaving, money-saving investment up the chain to the Safety Director, Chief of Police, and Mayor? We believe we can, if we do it together (NOTE: Thanks to Cantor Chomsky for the details on Gun Violence and this plan).

See you Tuesday night at the Zoomamiah Action from 7-8 pm. No driving. No parking. Just zooming together with 499 other households of faith.

When Deacon Stephen was dying, he saw heaven. Having spoken the truth with love, he went to be with his Savior. I pray today that we speak the truth with love on this side of heaven. When we do, we will see Heaven, too. Amen.