

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Easter 5A, Acts 7:55-60 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Today we hear the end of the story of Stephen, who is remembered as the first deacon. Deacon Bill is probably pea-green with envy that he isn't preaching today, because Stephen is the patron saint of deacons. We can learn a lot about deacons by looking at Stephen.

Now, I'm sure you couldn't help but notice that Stephen was stoned to death. That's an odd choice for a patron saint, isn't it? I actually started this sermon several times and stopped right here, because I thought I can't preach about a guy who gets stoned to death. When I preach, I try to find ways to apply the stories we hear in the Bible to the lives we live and are called to live today. I went back through years and years of sermons to see what I've said about Stephen in the past, and it turns out that I always end up picking the Gospel to preach on when this story comes up; because, who wants to talk about the stoning of Stephen?

No one wants to talk about that less than a preacher, because you know what Stephen was doing right before he got stoned to death? He was *preaching*. It was his sermon that caused this crowd to cover their ears and rush against him and drag him through the city and throw stones at him.

Who wants to preach about that? Not me. Yet somehow, this story wouldn't let me go this week.

Stephen is the patron saint of deacons. We are abundantly blessed in the deacon department here at St. David's. We're blessed to have a deacon at all; most churches don't. But not only do we have a deacon, we have Deacon Bill, a humble, kind, holy and funny deacon.

When I was first discerning a call to St. David's, I was a little worried about Deacon Bill, honestly. I remember coming up to him at Annual Council before I'd even submitted my name to the St. David's search committee. He was standing with a couple of people from St. David's, and I don't remember who it was—I just remember I could see the church name on their name tags, so I thought, hey, that's the church everyone keeps telling me to apply for. I should go schmooze them.

So I went up to Bill, who introduced me and proceeded to tell them how when he was on the Commission on Ministry and I was being interviewed, I'd embarrassed myself in front of the bishop.

I thought, oh no. This guy knows me too many embarrassing stories about me, so how could he ever take me seriously as a priest, since he's been ordained so much longer than I have? But as soon as I was announced, almost a year later, as the new rector, he called me and said, "I will always back you up." And he always has.

Bill is older than I am and has been ordained longer than I have, but he is humble and has the heart of a servant. The diaconate is a servant ministry, one focused more on the world outside

the church than inside the church. In the book of Acts, when Stephen and six others are chosen as deacons, they are specifically tasked with care for the poor. Bill has spent his ministry serving the incarcerated, including men on death row deemed unlovable by the world: but Bill loved those men. Bill has also served the homeless in our community. He and his servant heart are inspiring.

But in addition to being servants, deacons are prophets, and we see that in Bill and in Saint Stephen. It's interesting that today's reading focuses only on the part of the story where Stephen gets stoned to death, and not on his actual sermon. In the sermon, Stephen goes back in the Scripture all the way to Abraham and Moses, and interprets their stories in ways that were not flattering to the people listening to him.

Deacons are often more prophetic than priests. We see this in the earliest times, since Stephen was killed off a lot quicker than the non-deacons; but we parish priests have that reputation today, that we don't tell our parishioners the truth sometimes, because we're scared to make them mad. Episcopal deacons, on the other hand, do not have that reputation.

In a sermon Bill preached not long after I came, he said something about the death penalty, and how after he watched his first execution, he became against the death penalty. He asked me afterwards if I'd rather he not talk about issues like the death penalty. "I'm glad you did," I told him, "because I probably wouldn't." I know some of you wish that I would talk about controversial issues or politicians and politics more than I do, and take stands. There was an executive order on religious liberty recently, which seems to encourage priests like me to tell you all how vote. Here at St. David's, our blessing and challenge is that we *truly* are a diverse congregation, with many different opinions. I try not to step on the land mines when it comes to political positions. I intentionally avoid that, and I'm aware that those of you who wish I would take a stand more often really only want me to do that if I take the stand you think is right.

As a parish priest, I believe that is not my call. I believe that would get in the way of some beautiful relationships.

But deacons can be more outspoken in that way. That's a gift. Of course, it didn't work out very well for our friend Stephen, the first martyr.

Do you know what the word "martyr" means? Someone who dies for their faith. But in biblical Greek, the word means witness. A martyr is a witness.

When we hear the word "witness" today, it usually has a legal connotation. Speaking of that, last week Noelle Sanders graduated from law school, making me realize I might need to expand the way I talk about our church. I'm used to calling us a "church of nurses and teachers," because those seem to be our major professions. But I realize we now have five Christians in this congregation with legal degrees. So, apparently we're a church of nurses and teachers and attorneys!

What I hope we will continue to become is a church of witnesses. Not witness in a legal sense, and not witness in a martyr sense in that I want us to die for our faith. I don't want that for any of us. As Christians, however, we are called to be witnesses. We are called to talk to others about how Christ works in our lives.

We had our annual vestry retreat Friday and yesterday. It was on-site for the first time, and we enjoyed that. We spent time talking about how we can better connect with each other as a church, and how we can become more comfortable and effective inviting people to St. David's.

This morning, reflecting on the story of Stephen, I think about the witness aspect of inviting. About how we share our stories with other people. Sometimes the way we live our lives is a witness. Deacons are a good example for that, especially Bill, how he has lived his life, and the example he gives to all of us. His work with prisoners and the homeless. And hey, even college basketball people. He is a witness to all of them, too.

A friend said to me this week, "Sometimes there are deacons in a congregation who aren't ordained." And that's true, too. Saints in this congregation routinely take my breath away with the way you live out your faith. With your discipleship. With your quiet, humble witness.

I hope we can all start being a little louder in our witnessing. The vestry has ideas about this that we look forward to sharing. Together, we will get more comfortable talking about our faith and our faith family and how much they mean to us. How will you be a witness to Jesus Christ today?