

**Stephen and Saul: Second Acts**  
**A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**20 April 2008**  
**Text: Acts 6:8-15, 7:54-8:1**

The *Borders'* bookstore clerk told me copies are flying off the shelf, after appearing on best-seller lists everywhere. It's a thin book, chronicling the "last lecture" of a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University following his diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer. Randy Pausch is only 46 years old, married with three young children. In his "last lecture" he attempts to identify his most important values and how he hopes to be remembered, especially by his children. The poignancy of the situation prompts questions: What are the truths that anchor your life? What wisdom would you feel compelled to share if you knew you were out of tomorrows?

Of course we never really know how much—or how little—time we have. It's always good to know in our heart-of-hearts what matters most to us, and to evaluate from time to time how well our daily life, career, and relationships reflect those deepest convictions. Randy Pausch has offered his last lecture in the hope that others might be instructed or inspired to achieve their dreams and live life—however long or short—to the fullest.

Our morning text explores the "last lecture" of a biblical hero who also died young. Stephen is on at least two lists of "firsts"—he was one of the first seven men elected by the growing church to serve as a deacon, extending hospitality to the poor and administering the daily food distribution. He is also remembered as the first Christian martyr, murdered for public witness to his faith. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in the sixth chapter at the eighth verse. [READ ACTS 6:8-15] Hauled before the religious council, charged with the capital offense of blasphemy, Stephen is asked to testify. In your mind's eye, see

the scene. The crowd of onlookers and religious authorities is stirred up; the witnesses indignantly describe his threatening rhetoric. Stephen's testimony fills almost an entire chapter, and is a brilliant overview of God's presence and powerful actions throughout Israel's history. He invokes Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; then Moses and Aaron and the miraculous escape from slavery through the parted Red Sea waters and into the Promised Land. He recounts the mighty reigns of King David and King Solomon, and finally concludes with this fiery challenge; picking up in chapter seven, verse 51. [READ ACTS 7:51-8:1]

My seventh-grade Sunday School teacher, Mr. Wilcox, said Stephen held such strong Christian beliefs he would even die for them, and then asked us if we were willing to do the same. I imagine Mr. Wilcox figured that was a good lesson for adolescents much more concerned about peer pressure and our status in the middle school pecking order. When some Fairmounters discussed this passage in a sermon germination group recently, almost the first thing they noted was the parallel between Stephen and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose preaching has provoked strong negative reaction by its accusatory tone and critical stance. They thought perhaps Stephen should have toned down his message and tried harder to understand those who opposed him so vehemently. "It's one thing to pray and die," a group member said, "but what about dialog?" We all agreed that our society seems to have lost the capacity for civil discourse, of engaging one another over ideas rather than sound-bites and slogans; with mutual respect instead of suspicion and name-calling. And in a day when devotion to faith has motivated its adherents to sacrifice their own and others' lives, one wonders whether the unswerving conviction of Stephen is even desirable. Don't we want something a little kinder, less abrasive and less dangerous?

I do. But perhaps more than anything else, this tendency to choose the safer path is why I believe we should take a second look at Stephen. No less a leader than Abraham Lincoln insisted that no one reveals who you are better than your

adversary. The Judeo-Christian tradition calls these adversarial voices “the prophets” – persons called by God to proclaim God’s Word particularly in times when the faith community had forgotten or fallen away from the covenant. Old Testament prophets called those in power to account for their treatment of widows, orphans and immigrants—the most economically vulnerable in the society. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah—the pronouncements they made were very often of dire judgment. They sometimes used sharp language and graphic images to communicate the urgency of their message, and the necessity of change. The biblical prophets were not voted “most likely to succeed;” they didn’t get to be senior pastor of a tall steeple church. They weren’t focused on institutional maintenance or pastoral care to individuals. Instead, they were scorned, ridiculed, imprisoned, beaten and yes, killed. But their faithful testimony stands even today in texts that call God’s people back to God’s way: *“to let justice roll down like waters; righteousness like an everflowing stream”* [Amos 5:24]; *for what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”* [Micah 6:8] The media’s pillorying of Pastor Wright showed no understanding of the prophetic tradition and its particular style of “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.”

Stephen claims the role of prophet not for himself, but for Jesus Christ. In testifying about him, however, Stephen takes his place in the company of prophets; uncompromising about truth as he understood it and ready to stand and deliver it. Why should we listen? Friends, it’s so human to want to skip over the aspects of faith that challenge us most. We want to drown out voices that call us to examine our beliefs and behaviors, our perspectives and practices. But who better to show us what this faith community is about? Stephen was willing to pay the ultimate cost of following Jesus Christ, and though that degree of commitment may never be required of you or me, his witness does identify what is most important among many priorities. As much as I appreciated the content of Professor Pausch’s last lecture, what intrigues me most is its immense popularity. People are hungry for a truth

they can stake their lives upon; that will give life purpose while they breathe, and that will impart meaning after they've drawn their last breath.

The story of Stephen helps us remember that for Christians, Jesus Christ is the sure foundation, the Center that holds, even when everything around is eroding, changing, dying. We have to have our memories jogged -probably pretty often—because so many other voices compete for top priority. The truth of our top priority is proven in the blast furnace of chance and change. Even as the stones fell around him, Stephen had a vision of Christ's presence with him and triumph over the deadly forces. Stephen was so convinced of this that in his last moments he could pray for his murderers and commend his soul to God. Both his dying and his living bear remarkable resemblance to those of his Lord's; filled with a peace based not on external circumstances, but on inner conviction. Are you and I prepared to testify to what we're ready to die for? Or even better, who we intend to live for? If you and I were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

One of the members of the sermon germination group had been quiet during the lively discussion. She was wrestling with the text in her mind, applying it to her work situation. The previous year she had excelled in her business and been singled out for promotion and reward. This year, however, has been a different story. For a variety of reasons, she has had a much less successful year, even though she's worked equally hard and smart. She worries. Yet something in the story of Stephen worked on her as she compared Stephen's witness to her own. A saying of Mother Teresa's came to her; something the "Angel of Calcutta" had written in her own dark night of the soul. *God does not call us to be successful, God calls us to be faithful.* I believe that is equally true of individuals and congregations. The story of Stephen is contrasted with others in the book of Acts in which the apostles' preaching results in thousands of new believers. . . .exponential growth on the one hand, versus the death of the disciple on the other. The way of

Christ will not always yield immediate and obvious benefit; the blessing of Christ may come by way of sacrifice and suffering. Sometimes our best efforts may appear to produce nothing. Success may be ours, but that is not the criterion upon which we measure whether we have lived a worthy life or built a thriving church. Did we remain true to our faith? *If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*

Naomi Remen, in her book, *My Grandfather's Blessing* tells how her grandfather used to bring her gifts. For her fourth birthday he brought her a little cup filled with dirt. "If you promise to put some water in the cup every day, something will happen," he said. She writes, "So I promised. At first, curious to see what would happen, I did not mind doing this. But as the days went by and nothing changed, it got harder and harder to remember to put water in the cup. The second week was even harder and I became resentful of my promise to do so. By the third week I began to forget to water the cup and would often remember only after I'd gone to bed and then have to get out of bed and water it in the dark.

"But I did not miss a single day and one morning there were two little green leaves that had not been there the night before. I was completely astonished. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain he would be as surprised as I. But of course he was not. He explained to me that life and surprise are everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places. I was delighted. "And all it needs is water?" I asked. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. "No my little one, all it needs is your faithfulness."

This week nineteen young persons of this congregation presented their statements of faith and were received into membership of Christ's Church. Next Sunday we will celebrate their confirmation in worship they will lead. I am moved as I always am by the open-hearted trust of these ninth-graders; sometimes couched in a little self-consciousness because they're talking about things we don't talk about very often.

During their eight month preparation period they have struggled with faith, and what it means for their lives. You have to wonder what they make of a religion that actually sings as we did earlier “Let goods and kindred go; this mortal life also; the body they may kill; God’s truth abideth still: His Kingdom is forever.” They are only beginning to realize the dangers and difficulty of Christ’s way which the Church claims leads to ultimate safety and life. I pray for them, and for us all, to remain faithful, come what may.

Because, you see, there’s no end to this story. Standing off to the side, mentioned almost as an afterthought, we notice the other person in the scene, the young man, Saul. He is a witness too, silently approving of Stephen’s death. But it will not be the last time we hear of him, for “Saul” became “Paul” --- the greatest missionary apostle who shared the gospel of Christ in every corner of the Mediterranean world. Who could have imagined the transformation? And though we speak of his “Damascus Road” experience as if it were a single, dramatic vision that changed his mind and heart, isn’t it likely that the seeds of his conversion were planted there in the killing field outside the city? Through God’s amazing grace, the “last lecture” of Stephen led to the first by Saul. And by the grace of God, may its truth find a place in our hearts, preparing us to accept the costs of discipleship as well as its exquisite joy.

**NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS FOREVER AND EVER!  
AMEN.**

**The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor**