



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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An Old, Old Story

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 18, 2014
The Fifth Sunday of Easter—Based on John 14:1-14*

The two scriptures we have today don't appear to be particularly related. The first is a short snippet of a longer and fascinating story about the earliest martyr of the Christian church, Stephen. We pick up the account just as Stephen is being dragged out of the city and stoned, the most famous detail being that those casting the stones left their cloaks for safekeeping with a young man called Saul, whom we later know better by his Roman name, Paul.

The second story, from today's gospel, is a portion of the long discourse Jesus gave to his disciples just prior to his death. Beginning with ageless words of comfort, "Let not your hearts be troubled," the passage then with deadly certainty outlines how the comfort offered must be received, only through Jesus as "the way, the truth, the life." "No one," John's emphatic Jesus claims, "comes to the Father but by me."

Stephen's story, found only in the Acts of the Apostles, likely occurred in the middle of the first century just before Paul's conversion. Even then, Jerusalem was a place of turmoil and conflict. As now, it was a holy city, the site of many different and competing interpretations of religious purity and worthiness. Judaism was deeply troubled. Some Jews were becoming Christians; others were holding faithfully to their tradition. Many Jews, Hebraic Jews, had lived in Judea or Galilee all their lives. They spoke Aramaic, the principle language of their hometowns. Other Jews, Hellenist Jews, many of whom had lived away in various areas of the Diaspora, had returned to Jerusalem, speaking Greek and following customs foreign to the conventional Jews of the region. Some Jews from each group, Hellenist and Hebraic, became Christians; others did not. Conflict abounded all round.

The circumstances, which led to Stephen's death and to Saul's involvement in it, created the perfect storm, each man in some ways a victim of a religious struggle that continues today—one defending a tradition which to the other had become lifeless and rigid, one speaking of freedom that to the other seemed dangerous, even blasphemous. In times of chaos like that, fundamentalism often was (and is) an attractive and seductive antidote. Stephen was a preacher, an evangelist, who had caught the free spirit blowing from the gospel of love, spoken and lived by Jesus. Saul's personal story, on the other hand, led him to a brand of fundamentalism. A Hellenized Jew, he had grown up in Tarsus, near the coast of Southern Turkey, in a devout family that did its best to remain true to Judaism even in a foreign land—no small task. Saul had ordered his life on the precision and certainty of Jewish law. Hearing the outrageous and loving inclusion of Stephen's message must clearly have outraged him, threatening him to the core of his being. Not surprisingly, he became radicalized. The great wonder is that he simply held the cloaks of those who killed Stephen rather than joining the stoning himself. Stephen, committed to the poor and the destitute, more concerned with hunger than with rules about the cleanliness of food, probably touched the heart of Saul but scared him to death. What could be counted on, Saul must have wondered, if not the law: "This is clean; this is not; the Sabbath is holy or it is not. No exceptions; only the law." What makes Saul's conversion to become a follower of Jesus so remarkable to me is less about his "becoming a Christian" than about how much bigger his sense of God became, about how it transformed him from a man who had all the answers to one who dared to live in the ambiguity of love. It is a remarkable story of something much bigger than an intra-Jewish struggle about doctrine; it is an account of God's ongoing action in the world toward bringing creation to fullness and unity.

I said in my opening remarks that our lessons from John and Acts seem unrelated; in fact, though, they are not. Moving now from mid-century when Stephen was martyred, through the late 80's when Luke probably recorded the story of Stephen, the setting of today's gospel is around the turn of the century. What we find in this account from John is an early and sad example of Christian fundamentalism, an issue from which we have never fully been freed. Though we love the Gospel of John for its mystical and elegant language about Jesus, its moving devotional promise of God's presence in our lives always, the chaos of conflict that existed at the time of its writing resulted in a deadly form of fundamentalism, which has fueled not only anti-Semitism but Christian triumphalism of the worst order. The message of John, which though much more strident than the other gospels, has become a dominant voice of Christianity in proclaiming that there is only one way—"No one comes to the Father but by me, there can be no compromise, one way must be utterly wrong for the other way to be completely right."

By the time of the writing of John, the major dispute remaining within Judaism was less a question of which language Jews would speak, Aramaic or Greek, and more the growing divide between Jews, who now understood themselves as Christians, and Jews who remained faithful to Judaism. John, undoubtedly a Jew himself, was threatened and outraged by those who refused to hear his message of Jesus. For him, Jesus of Nazareth had become the full-blown Christ of the Church, whose message was that only He, the Christ, could bring souls into communion with God. To believe otherwise for John would have been destructively dissonant, for this had become the orthodoxy that had to be defended, not dissimilar, I imagine, from the fervor Saul felt many years earlier in defending his way of being religious.

We get that historically; indeed we are sympathetic to it. But by the grace of an ever inspiring and enlarging God, we need not fall victim any longer to that kind of narrow and divisive fundamentalism. Our understanding of truth is or can be broader than that. The Christ of our faith can indeed be our way, our truth, our life, without the necessity of its being the only way for everyone else. The world needs the love of Christ; *we need the love of Christ*: to make us not more sectarian but less, to convert us continually, not to move us away from our story but to understand it broadly enough to live and love all people, all of the children of God.

Yesterday morning (and into the afternoon) many of us in the Diocese of New York gathered for the consecration of Allen Shin as our new Suffragan Bishop. In a big splashy way, it was we at our resplendent best: the procession went on for days, the music roared, and the incense was wearable. Allen Shin is a good man, I believe; and there is nothing wrong with the way we do carry on. But sitting there, I found myself thinking about the stories of Stephen and John (in a three hour service, one has time to think), stories which, of course, seemed so far from what was happening all around me. It is not that moments like yesterday, or our shorter version of it each Sunday, are wrong; it is simply that they matter only when they connect us to life in the real world, only when they infuse us with energy and love for life in that world, not when they insulate or inoculate us from it. Our fine assemblies only find favor with God, the scripture tells us, when they empower us to make a difference in this world by living our own lives as people with measured and authentic priorities, when they teach us to love not only those near and dear to us, those like us, but also when they inspire us to seek good for those far beyond not just our borders but the limits even of our imagination and understanding. Otherwise as the man who became Paul, said, "They are but clanging symbols." What remains at the end of our assemblies, he also told us, are "faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love."

In the name of God: *Amen*.