

From Conversion to Community to Cross

Acts 7:55-60

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Many of you might remember last year when I told you about our experiences with Comcast cable repair services at our house. We have at our house one TV that has digital cable and high definition. It works a lot of the time, but often, when we are watching one of the high definition channels the picture will start to break up to the point that you really can't watch it and we have to switch to a regular channel.

We've been having this problem and trying to get it resolved since January of 2007. That's right, from January of 2007 to about two weeks ago I would periodically call Comcast and tell them about my problem. They would then schedule someone to come out—let's say between 2 and 4 on a Thursday afternoon. So the person shows up Friday morning about 8:00.

I explain the situation. He looks around. Using some instrument he checks various outlets. He goes outside and checks the box out there. He possibly makes some minor adjustment or simply says that he can't find anything wrong. I think we have had 10 different people out to do this over the last 16 months. It always involves taking at least a half day off work.

You might remember me talking about David Brown, supervisor of C-Cor, a Comcast subcontractor. Yes, I had his personal cell phone number, but no I could never get him to get anyone out to our house to fix our problem. So I gave up on David Brown.

To make a long story short, a few weeks ago I restarted my quest to get my cable fixed. After three or four visits by several different technicians, I finally had a guy crawl through our attic and replace the cable that goes from our TV to the outside box. He came back inside, we turned on the TV, and it didn't work.

Somewhere along the way, I was able to get the cell phone number to Mark, a supervisor for The Cable Guys, which is another company that subcontracts with Comcast. Mark is a good man. He promised me that he would get someone out who would fix my problem.

Mark sent a man out two Saturdays ago. He climbed up the utility pole in my neighbor's backyard and found that the cable running from there to my house was all chewed up. He replaced it. And wonder of wonders, it worked.

After 16 months—585 days—my high definition digital cable was working. I was on top of the world. I couldn't wait to call Heidi and tell her it was working. I was so happy I had to share my good news. I had worked for this for a good portion of my mid-thirties. I felt like I had achieved peace in the

Middle East. I watched the Final Four in glorious high definition.

About three days later, I got an envelope in the mail from Comcast. It was a bill. \$169.95. I was being charged for getting my cable to work. For 16 months I've been paying \$78.50 every month for digital cable that has never completely worked.

Apparently, the \$78.50 I had been paying was just for the *possibility* of having working digital cable. If you want it to actually work, it will cost you an extra \$169.95.

They had finally fixed it. I was so happy. And then I got a bill.

Most good things that come your way in life aren't free. You get something good, and then you get a bill. There's a cost attached. With most good things there is a cost.

Think about the progression of our scripture passages the last three weeks. The scriptures from Acts come from early church sermons and events that describe the people's response to the resurrection.

The question we are asking is, How did they respond to the resurrection? How did they move from witnessing the day of Easter to becoming the people of Easter?

First, there was Peter's sermon where 3,000 people responded to the message of Jesus and were baptized. 3,000 people responded individually and had a personal experience with Christ. Conversion.

Then, last week, we looked at those verses in Acts 2 that tell us that the first thing those 3,000 people did was to come together and form a remarkable community where they prayed together, worshiped together, shared with each other, cared for each other, and loved each other.

They moved from conversion to Christ to community in Christ. And it was great. Other people were so impressed with the remarkable way that these early Christians were living their lives together that every day new people were joining the Christian movement.

It was great. They were so happy they had to share their good news. Community.

But then we have today's story. And Luke here in Acts moves from the positive response of Peter's hearers in Acts 2—a response which leads to the explosive growth of the church—to the negative reaction of Stephen's hearers—a response that leads to Stephen's death.

People are not going to buy tickets to hear me preach this sermon in the FedEx Forum, but it's true that not all good works result in benefits to those who do them.

Not all faithfulness to God brings immediate blessing on those who are faithful. Commitment to Christ may result in pain as well as joy, death as well as life.

Being a follower of Christ is like most good things—there is a cost attached. And so the progression in authentic Christianity is from conversion to community to cross.

We need to hear Stephen's story. Stephen was not one of the original twelve disciples, but a more recent convert to the Jesus movement.

The book of Acts says that a dispute broke out between Jesus' original, Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jewish followers and the Hellenist (Greek-speaking) Christians. As we learned in last week's lesson from Acts, the early church made it a practice to gather all personal possessions and distribute them to those in need.

Well, the Hellenists thought that their widows weren't getting their fair share of the food. The twelve disciples responded by saying that they were too busy preaching the good news to spend their time doing social work. To solve the problem, they called a congregational meeting.

At the meeting, the twelve decided to let the Hellenists choose seven respected individuals from among themselves. The job of these servants, which is where we get our word "deacons" would be to "wait on tables" and "keep the accounts." That is,

they were to make sure the important work of feeding the needy would be done efficiently and fairly.

One of those chosen was Stephen, who became the head deacon of the Jesus movement. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, wise, charismatic, and strong in faith. As it turned out, he was a pretty good preacher, too, although he was just supposed to be in charge of the food pantry.

One day, some Greek-speaking Jews who had not joined the Jesus movement decided that they had heard enough from and about Stephen. They feared that he was going to convert all the Hellenists in the city, while Peter and rest converted all the native Palestinians.

Then everybody would be followers of this false Messiah, and that would be the end of Judaism. The Hellenists had Stephen arrested on false charges and brought before the temple council, just as Jesus had been not long before.

As he delivers his defense, Stephen's face shines as Jesus' had at his transfiguration. Recalling God's faithfulness to Israel, he declares his belief in the same God the priests believe in—the God of Abraham and Sarah who saved the people from slavery in Egypt. But he also highlights how they had rejected Moses and the Law, and, ultimately, God.

Stephen's sermon ends when he points to his captors, saying, *And just as our ancestors rejected God, the prophets, and the*

Law, so you, too, have now rejected God's Messiah. In fact, you betrayed and murdered him.

Well, that was all the priests needed to hear. The priests seized Stephen. Amazingly, he's not afraid at this moment when death is likely. Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit as they lay their hands on him. He looks up and sees a vision of Jesus standing next to God in heaven.

The priests drag him out of Jerusalem and proceed to stone him. As they do the awful deed, Stephen prays, *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*, words similar to Jesus' words on the cross (*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*). The last words of Stephen echo other words uttered by Jesus on the cross: *Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*

[thanks for this description to Rev. Jeffrey Phillips, St. Johns United Church of Christ, Arlington Hts., Illinois]

And so Stephen is remembered as the first Christian martyr—one who dies for his faith. He wasn't the last. There have been many more. Fast forward to the 20th century, and there is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor in the Confessing Church in Germany, a small group of churches who spoke out when the Nazis Hitler came to power in the 1930's. In 1943, Bonhoeffer was put in prison.

Later, after a failed attempt on Hitler's life, it was discovered that Bonhoeffer was linked to the plot. It had been a very difficult decision for Bonhoeffer, who was essentially a

pacifist, but the unthinkable deaths of millions of Jews had driven him to be a part of the plot. He was hanged shortly before the liberation of the concentration camp.

How about Jonathan Daniels? He was an Episcopal seminary student who was watching TV when he saw Martin Luther King, Jr. ask for volunteers to come to Selma and help secure the right for all people to vote. It was March of 1965. Daniels asked the dean of his seminary for a leave of absence and went to Hayneville, Alabama where he was put in jail for joining a picket line.

When he and four others were unexpectedly released on a hot afternoon, he knew something was wrong. They walked together to small store near the jail and took refuge inside. Moments later, a sixteen-year-old black girl named Ruby Sales walked up the steps to the store when a man with a gun suddenly appeared and started cursing at her. Daniels pulled the girl aside, and he was shot in her stead.

I preach on this story of Stephen with some mixed emotions today. In the times in which we live, it seems like religious martyrs are not what we need most. We have seen people fly airplanes into buildings to become religious martyrs. We see people strap bombs to themselves and blow themselves up for their God.

We have more than enough of that. We certainly don't need fundamentalists of any religion taking up the cause of this kind

of martyrdom and adding to the religious violence in our world.

So one thing we need to remember is that what Stephen did, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jonathan Daniels did, was dangerous, make no mistake. But they were not trying to get themselves killed; they were just trying to be faithful in extraordinary circumstances.

They weren't trying to get killed, and they certainly didn't kill themselves with bombs. They were simply giving their lives faithfully to what they believed was right. What Stephen did was dangerous; speaking truth to power always is. But he was just trying to be faithful and honest.

Remember what the word "martyr" means. It doesn't mean "one who is killed for his faith." The word means simply "witness." A martyr is a witness, someone who is a witness to the truth.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that most of us have known people who believe they are being martyrs when all they are really being is obnoxious. They're the ones who harass you until you finally tell them please to get lost and then they start moaning about how hard it is to serve the Lord.

But if being a martyr begins by being a witness, I don't think it works that way. In fact, I don't think you can seek it anymore 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. They have such a focus on the heavenly vision that they forget to look out for danger, and the next thing they know it's raining rocks.

Stephen wasn't trying to be obnoxious. He was just so caught up in living God's life that his boldness outran his common sense. And it provoked a reaction that killed him.

The way he died revealed what he was living for. Stephen was a witness. Being willing to take up your cross is a part of being a Christian just like conversion and just like being in a church community.

Clarence Jordan was the founder of Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia. The purpose of Koinonia Farms, which Jordan started in 1942, was to build a racially inclusive community where Christians would live in radical obedience to Christ and help local farmers, especially the poor.

Millard Fuller and Habitat for Humanity grew out of Koinonia Farms. Our own former associate Joel Snider wrote his doctoral dissertation on Clarence Jordan. There are hundreds of great stories about Clarence Jordan. He was a real radical Christian and a real character.

Once in the early 50s Clarence Jordan approached his lawyer brother Robert Jordan for help. Robert Jordan later served in Georgia as a State Senator and eventually as a Justice for the

Georgia Supreme Court. Clarence asked his brother Robert if he would represent Koinonia Farms in a lawsuit that had been filed against them because of the interracial nature of the farm.

Robert replied, *Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. If I represent you I ruin my future, and I might lose my job and my house and everything I've got.*

We might lose everything too, Bob, Clarence replied.

It's different for you, his brother answered.

Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, "Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" And I said, "Yes." What did you say?

Clarence, I follow Jesus... up to a point.

Could that point by any chance be the cross?

That's right. I follow him to the cross but not on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified.

Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you're an admirer not a disciple.

Robert Jordan shot back, *Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't have a church, would we?*

Probably not. But if no one felt that way, we definitely wouldn't have a church.

You can't have conversion and you can't have community, without the cross.

The cross is not the end of the story of Jesus. The empty tomb is the end of the story. But the cross is part of the story. And without the cross the story is never complete.