

Sticks and stones: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; Acts 7:55-60

Faithful suffering has always been part of the calling for God's people.

by [Scott Bader-Saye](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

Who would have thought that being a waiter could be so dangerous? One might expect impatient customers, lousy tips and long hours—these come with the territory. But more dire consequences? Surely not. Yet in the sixth chapter of Acts Stephen is chosen as one of seven who will “wait on tables,” an occupation and a witness that will lead to his death. The 12 apostles must not be distracted from their preaching to attend to the daily distribution of food to the widows. So Stephen becomes a kind of subversive refectory worker, and though he is chosen not to preach but to serve, his witness of caring for the least in the community (Jew and gentile alike) so provokes and challenges the powers that be that he is captured and killed. The first Christian martyr comes not from those preaching the word, but from those feeding the hungry.

The lectionary picks up the story with Stephen preparing for his death. Luke uses this incident to display the cruciform pattern of discipleship. Those who follow Jesus bear witness to him by imitating his own peaceful self-sacrifice. Like Jesus, Stephen is attacked by an angry crowd (see Luke 4:28-29) and taken out of the city. In his last words, Stephen commends his spirit to Jesus, just as Jesus commended his to the Father, and just as the psalmist commended his own suffering to God. Echoes build upon echoes in this text, reminding us that faithful suffering has always been part of the calling for God's people. As Stephen prays for his enemies and forgives his attackers, “Lord, do not hold this against them,” we hear the words of Jesus rattling in our ears, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

In the wake of September 11 there was an increase both in church attendance and in gun purchases—an odd juxtaposition of behaviors. We seem to believe in a God who will preserve our future beyond the grave, but we worry that God may not be all we need on this side. We find it hard to affirm with the psalmist, “My times are in your hand,” when the times are so dark and frightening. And so we feel tempted,

compelled, to take matters into our own hands. We find it hard to trust that God will deliver us from “enemies and persecutors,” and so we seek through force to assure the destruction of the enemy.

The words and witness of Jesus might catch us up short in this project were we not able to convince ourselves that while the way of suffering sacrifice was part of Jesus’ divine mission, it is not part of our calling as his followers. His words about loving enemies are nice in theory, we say, but surely he knew they were impossible for us. Jesus could forgive enemies, but we are not Jesus.

This sentiment echoed loud and clear in a recent church meeting, where one parishioner quoted General Norman Schwartzkopf, “It is God’s job to forgive, it is our job to arrange the meeting.” The belief that Jesus’ path of forgiveness does not apply to us is compelling in times of fear and crisis, but it is a belief that Luke does not leave open to us. Stephen shows that the “impossible ethic” of enemy love is indeed possible, though costly. One need not be divine to do what Jesus did. Jesus tells us: “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

In the simple act of feeding the widow, Stephen does the works of Jesus, but in the process he opens himself to the forces of the world that will not stand for such a witness and he is stoned to death. Yet, in the face of death-dealing stones he clings to Jesus, the Living Stone, who has already passed through death and has taught him the way. And like Jesus, Stephen in his final words recalls Psalm 31, which entreats God: “Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress.” The Living Stone faces down the stones of death, and Stephen knows where his deliverance lies. “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, / Let me hide myself in Thee.”

T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* dramatizes the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170. The story builds to the final moments when Becket is pulled inside the cathedral by three priests trying to save him from the king’s forces. They bar the door for safety, but Thomas, with a boldness befitting Stephen himself, demands:

Unbar the doors! throw open the doors!
I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ,
The sanctuary, turned into a fortress . . .

The church shall be open, even to our enemies. . . .

We are not here to triumph by fighting, by stratagem, or by resistance,

Not to fight with beasts as men. We have fought the beast

And have conquered. We have only to conquer

Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory.

Now is the triumph of the Cross, now

Open the door! I command it. OPEN THE DOOR!

Like Stephen and like Jesus, Thomas went to his death opposing the forces of evil not with power but with faithfulness. Though we are tempted to hide behind barricades, guns and bombs, the stories of the martyrs remind us of the one who overcame evil not by defeating the enemy but by loving the enemy and thus defeating death itself.