

“Happy are they who have not walked  
in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in  
the way of sinners, nor sat in  
the seats of the scornful.” AMEN!

Are you ready to sing today, St. Stephen?

(Teach the chorus)

“People have the power  
People have the power  
People have the power  
People have the power”

(Sing!)

“I was dreaming in my dreaming  
God knows a purer view  
As I lay down to my sleeping  
I commit my dream to you.”

“People have the power!” (3X)

“The power to dream, to rule  
To wrestle the earth from fools  
But its decreed the people rule” (2X)

That one, performed by Patti Smith and  
written with her late husband Fred,

came to mind this week as I prepared  
for the message today.

Though this section of John does not follow on  
the heels of last week's message, the theme does.

People have the power to love or not.

It is important for us to know that  
the word "power"  
itself is neutral.

Alone, it reveals nothing positive or negative.

It can be wielded destructively or  
constructively depending on the intention  
and the integrity of the person or group.

Jesus had power, exemplified in today's gospel,  
through his prayer and Peter exhibited  
power when he stood up among  
the believers and preached about  
the fulfillment of scripture,  
in the reading from Acts.

Jesus' power was announced as  
constructive protection upon his disciples  
and future followers (that's you and me!)

who follow his teachings.

Think about that constructive power  
from Jesus's prayer directed at you and me.

Life giving and power shared.

Peter's power, in his preaching, is not as constructive.

And I say that, not in thoughtless criticism,  
because what Peter was trying to do  
was something we all try to do.

I do it often in my sermons.

In the position of power, I try to make  
sense of things we wonder about.

Especially when the wonderings pertain to God, right?

And in this case, most everyone,  
serious about their faith journey and  
discipleship learning,

must ponder (like Peter did)  
why Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus?

Sometimes it will come up when  
a question is asked, a question like,

“Is Judas in heaven?”

Or it comes up when we try to explain  
the reasons why Judas did what he did and  
the repercussions of his actions.

The Bible gives us some surface explanations  
like maybe it was greed, or maybe he  
was frustrated that Jesus spoke about  
this plan of sacrifice that would take  
him all the way to the cross.

It's not crystal clear!

Even the demise of Judas is hard to know.

One gospel said he hanged himself and  
in Acts we are told his belly was sliced open  
from the image of his bowels being caused  
to gush out.

We aren't given any more information.

So Peter tried to explain what happened to Judas  
by connecting it to scripture fulfillment.

The ol' “It had to happen.”

He used his power, as often times

I have used it, in dubious ways.

Yet, it makes me thankful to have  
the freedom to change my mind and  
consider Judas with different eyes.

That's good because in many ways  
we are little Judas's, and we  
probably know a few, too.

This does not mean we would have all done  
what Judas did or we know people  
who would do what he did, but it does  
beg the question:

How do we relate to some people  
believing in Jesus and some people  
not believing in Jesus?

That's the real question for us in the church today.

What is our calling to navigate between those  
who believe and those who don't  
because we have the power to love or not.

(Pause)

I admit that I have more personal stories  
that reveal the ways I have failed to use  
my power to love.

In junior high, I went to an all boys Catholic school.

We all know how destructive and mean kids  
can be at that age.

There was this one schoolmate, Jason.

Jason had soft skin, puffy brown hair, and soft voice.

He was an easy target.

Someone in the class said they looked “fluffy.”

And just like that, “Fluffy” became their name.

Thankfully there wasn't any physical abuse,  
but (make no mistake) Fluffy was  
mocked by students.

Segregated and ostracized, and many of us  
who witnessed it called ourselves Christian,  
but did nothing to defend or include them.

I had the power to say something,  
do something, something constructive and loving,  
but I chose to be silent.

I failed to create belonging.

People have the power to love or not. (Pause)

A father shared a story about adopting a daughter  
who had been in foster care for a number of years.

She'd been shuffled from one foster home  
to another and at one of her settings,  
she was left at home while everyone  
else went to Disney.

You see, she'd misbehaved and  
the foster parents wanted to punish her  
so they left her home while the rest of  
them went to the Magic Kingdom.

After the new couple adopted the girl, they too,  
began to plan for a trip to Disney.

In the month leading up to the vacation  
the daughter began acting out terribly,  
believing she'd be left behind again.

The new parents reassured her that she was  
part of the family and would not be excluded.

The trip began a process of understanding that  
the girl truly belonged.

People have the power to love or not. (Pause)

So, while in the past I have focused  
a sermon (or two) on Peter's good leadership  
in this section to "fill the gap" left by Judas,

today I am led to admit that Peter's explanation of  
why Judas did what he did,  
is less than satisfactory.

Maybe he had to deal with moving forward and  
there's good intention there,  
as well as forgiveness,

but he used his power in destructive ways.

To make excuses, or create reasons  
why people sometimes do what they do  
as "predestined by scripture" is problematic.

It would have been better for him to preach  
that what Judas did caused harm.

That it was a deadly harmful action  
not only for Jesus, but for Judas' connectivity  
to the disciple community.

And, Peter could have mentioned that what  
Judas did didn't need to be terminal.



His actions did not have to lead to death.

After all, Peter could have said,  
“Look at me! I denied our Lord, three times  
in his greatest need.

I am not without sin, but I came back and  
was forgiven and welcomed.”

Like Peter, Judas had been chosen  
by Jesus and wasted the opportunity,  
shirked his responsibility, and  
therefore required Jesus’ forgiveness.

He could have come back from it.

How tragic that he did not return  
to receive forgiveness, at least in ways  
that were clearly told in the Bible.

It makes me wonder, maybe you too,  
if anyone ever went and searched for Judas?

Did anyone offer him a lifeline to return?

Was he around long enough to hear  
the rumors of resurrection? (Pause)

Perhaps this is our mission.

It's clear there's something refreshing and uniquely inspiring about St. Stephen using her power to illuminate how we are being a "set-apart" community.

We need to know how we would answer this question?

Is there a line a person can cross that is so far that they would not be welcomed back? (Pause)

There's a survey somewhere that asked why twenty and thirty-somethings don't go to church and a majority said it was because churches aren't Christian enough.

Meaning churches don't follow Jesus' teaching.

Then they asked another group at the same ages, but this one being a group of 20 & 30 somethings

that were brought up in the church but have left it.

They said, just because I'm not there now, doesn't mean I won't return.

We can satisfy both these demographics

by choosing the power to love and  
by never pulling up the drawbridge  
for people to come to church.

That's what it means to belong to Jesus.

That's what makes this place a place of God's people.

A place called to love the world  
because God loves the world.

AMEN!