

One Church's Impact

Acts 7:51-8:1

Fifth Sunday in Lent, (April 3) 2022

54th Anniversary of AHBC

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Fifty-four years ago today, the first Sunday in April of 1968, the Scripture you just heard read was read for the inaugural worship service of Austin Heights Baptist Church. Jerry Self, a young PhD student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, got up to preach. This first sermon was called, "One Man's Impact on the World" about the deacon Stephen, his testimony before the Sanhedrin, and his subsequent martyrdom.

Jerry pointed out that most of chapter 7 in the book of Acts is Stephen's testimony – really a long sermon. Back in chapter 6, the Apostles were overwhelmed with the day-to-day tasks of the church, visiting shut-ins, waiting tables, helping the church serve one another. The Apostles said, "We want you to call from among yourselves seven men of good standing (it was all men at this point), full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom you will appoint to serve (6:3). So, the young church called Stephen, along with Philip, and five others to be deacons, servants. Acts says that Stephen was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5). A few verses later it said, "Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8).

But Stephen doing great wonders and signs among the people was too much for some real-religious types from the nearby synagogue. They tried arguing with Stephen but Stephen out-Bibled them and being full of the Holy Spirit, he out-lived

them, too. Chapter 6 and 7 are clear that Stephen's entire demeanor and everything about him was Christ-like. The last verse of chapter 6 says that the religious authorities looked intently at Stephen "and his face was like the face of an angel" (6:15). In response, these real-religious types, not letting their religious scruples get in the way, and even though Stephen was embodying a remarkable Godly-life, the religious types plotted and planned in secret and bribed some folks to go to the religious authorities and lie, "This Stephen fellow is saying blasphemous things about Moses and God. And if that's not enough, Stephen is also telling everyone that Jesus of Nazareth is going to destroy this place and change everything we've ever believed!"

Well, we can't have such revolutionary talk going around, so the religious higher-ups brought Stephen in and had him speak before them. Most all of chapter 7 is Stephen testifying. And does he ever! He pulls no punches, holds nothing back, and speaking from their same Scriptures and from the same tradition, which he knows as well or better than they do, beginning with Abraham and the patriarchs, down through Moses and David, Stephen shows them that people like them – the religious leaders – have never done God's will. In v. 51, he gets more direct, "You are hard-headed, stiff-necked, and close-minded to God. All you've ever done is kill those who were messengers of God!" (v. 51-53).

Well, as you can imagine, the high-and-mighty religious types were not happy. They dragged him outside of the city and organized a lynching, stoning him to death.

In this first sermon to Austin Heights, Jerry Self emphasized three things that made Stephen have a great impact upon the world: (1) As a deacon he

supported the ministry of the church. Much of the day-to-day ministry of the church is out of sight and overlooked, but tending to these things – keeping things running, checking on one another, and so on, is what Stephen and the deacons did, and because of them, the church was growing like a wildfire. (2) Stephen had an outspoken testimony. This was the same Sanhedrin who had recently condemned Jesus and now Stephen is before them. Stephen could have kept his mouth shut, or perhaps found other things to talk about, but he was loud and clear in witnessing about Jesus of Nazareth – pointing to Christ.

And here in his sermon, Jerry speaks out loud what was in everyone's minds that day, because it was Sunday, April 7. And on Thurs. April 4, Martin Luther King had been assassinated. Jerry said about Stephen, "A guy could get killed for being plain-spoken. Martin Luther King, Jr. just did." Jerry went on to say, (3) Stephen made an impact on the world because his faith was infectious. It was contagious and it spread from Stephen to a young man on the edge of the crowd named Saul, who became the Apostle Paul.

The book of Acts says that this young man Saul was on the edge of the crowd watching all this. When the enraged mob lynched Stephen, Saul stood there and held everyone's coats (7:58). A couple of verses later it says that Saul approved of their lynching Stephen (v.60). But I want us to pause here, just for a moment. Pause where Saul is on the edge of the crowd – is he a bystander? Is he just going along with the mob, until he too gets caught up in their killing frenzy?

Let me share with you what Jerry Self told me a few years ago at our church's 50th anniversary. I ask him about this first sermon at Austin Heights and he told me that on that Thursday, April 4, he was in his study at home working on

this sermon on this text. It was in the middle of the afternoon, but he noticed that he heard the voice of Walter Cronkite on the television in the other room. Knowing that it was unusual for Cronkite to be on at that time of the day, Jerry said he got up and went in to see what was going on. On the screen was a photo of Dr. Martin Luther King and his birthdate and then the date of that day, April 4, 1968, with the voice of Walter Cronkite saying, “Dr. Martin Luther King is dead.” Jerry said he stood there dumbfounded for quite a while watching, eventually going back to his study and to this sermon, “One Man’s Impact on the World” thinking both about Stephen and about Dr. King.

He and I talked further about that day and that first sermon. Here he was preaching to a brand-new just getting organized small congregation. It was a congregation of young SFA faculty members and their families, all of whom were tired of all-White churches with segregated membership policies, and all of whom were tired of being in churches where the two biggest issues of the day could not be talked about: racism and the war in Vietnam. If you attempted to talk about these issues, you were told you were causing trouble, spreading revolutionary rumors much like Stephen back in the New Testament. But these young faculty members, along with all sorts of people in 1968 were desperately asking, what does the Bible, what does the New Testament, say about racism and what about the Vietnam war? And they wanted a church in which you could ask and wrestle with the issues of the day in light of faith in Jesus Christ.

So, Jerry worked on this sermon that afternoon. He wrote about Stephen and the impact of one person in the world. But that’s not all. He told me he struggled with how to talk to this small congregation full of people like young Saul, smart, educated, and standing on the edge of the crowd while a black man is lynched. The

question from Jerry to us then and now, was what was/what is Austin Heights going to do?

One church can have an impact and are we going to be bystanders or get involved – here are two themes that have guided our church for our entire history. The truth is that for most of our history we have never worried much over whether we will have an impact. Indeed, we have long learned that our calling is to be involved, to participate in the work of God healing, redeeming, and loving in a hard world, and then let the chips fall where they may. The impact is up to God. Time and time again we have discovered that if we do the right thing, the Christ-like thing, then we'll have more of an impact than we thought.

So we had the Love Class in 1970, soon after our building was completed. The Love Class was a Sunday School class designed specifically for persons with Down's Syndrome because we had a family in the church with a son with Down's Syndrome. The young men in that class soon became ushers on Sunday morning and about a year later, church members working with these young men organized a Sheltered Workshop program during weekdays. In 1974 it moved to larger facilities on Mound Street and became part of what was then known as the Dept. of MH/MR.

Or we could talk about starting Project Imagine, also in the early 70's, an early childhood daycare and training program for children and parents who were welfare recipients. Or the Listening Ear, a crisis hot-line started in 1970 focused on mental health crises. When the Sheltered Workshop or Project Imagine or the Listening Ear was started, there was nothing else like them by any agency in this part of East Texas, but all of them grew until they out-grew us and were eventually

taken over by state or local agencies. Or, of course, our partnership with Zion Hill First Baptist Church was started in 1970 and here we are meeting together tonight. In all these, and many more across the decades, we never pondered our impact. We simply did what was needed at the time and discovered it was a calling. We let the impact be in God's hands.

No, most of the time, we don't worry a whole lot about having an impact. But these last few years we do struggle about being bystanders. It's not that we do not want to be involved, it is more of how many concerns and needs can we be involved in and not be overwhelmed by sorrow, suffering, hurt, anger, and grief? After several years of democracy being attacked, voter suppression, the rise of White nationalism, and two years of Covid isolation and disconnection, we are burned-out, beaten down, suffering from whatever we want to call it: compassion fatigue, empathetic distress, or secondary traumatic stress. And it shows up in all sorts of ways of acting out in our families, at work, with one another. We can't sleep or we sleep too much. We have panic attacks, heart palpitations, can't remember things, and on and on. We're exhausted, our resilience is worn down, and maybe some time on the bench, sitting on the sidelines is exactly what we need.

Back to young Saul. Maybe he started out being a bystander. But he was deeply committed to his faith and soon, he got involved with great zeal. He went from being a bystander to becoming a persecutor, hunting down Christians, throwing them into prison, beating them up, even lynching them. Until one day something happened: Saul was on his way to Damascus to stamp out this Jesus Movement that was spreading faster than he could keep up with. Suddenly he is blinded in a flash from heaven and hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are

persecuting me?” Saul asks, “Who are you?” and the voice responds, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” In other words, somehow or another, he heard and listened to the voice of the very one and the very people who were suffering because of him.

What happened to Saul, who became the Apostle Paul after this, is what happens to most of us, even though usually less dramatic. We hear God’s call through the needs of those who are suffering. We don’t start out in the morning thinking, “Well, today I’m going to come off of the sidelines and get back into it.” No, usually we’re going about our business, and something happens, we see something, we hear something, and it becomes a God thing – our eyes are opened, our hearts are tenderized, and we join in with what God is doing.

I remember Sue Wenner’s story from about four or five years ago of coming out of Kroger’s with a load of groceries and noticing a Hispanic family loading groceries in the trunk of their car. Some man pulled his car right up to where they were (he could have easily gone around them) and sat down on his horn at them repeatedly, obviously harassing them. Sue hurriedly put her groceries in her car and went back to help the family, intervening, standing between them and the man harassing them with his car horn, while also offering to help them.

For Sue, and for us, there are times when we must get involved. We cannot be bystanders any longer.

For us to continue to participate in the work of God over the long-haul takes deep roots in worship and prayer. And I mean prayer – not rattling off a list of concerns and worries to God before we turn the light off. The kind of prayer that

will sustain us through the traumas and darkness of our times, means meditating on our concerns in God's presence. Sometimes it means crying to God and often it means articulating and giving voice. It certainly means listening – to God and to the voices of those suffering. And all this takes time. And if we don't take this kind of time, we won't make it. We'll become shrill and angry and cynical and more part of the problem than God's solution.

There is an old truth in prayer: the slower we go, the faster we'll get there. The more we slow down and spend time with God, the more we'll accomplish in ministry and service.

The second imperative to coming off the sidelines and getting involved in God's work, is that we do not do it alone. Everything about the Christian life is done in relationship. Everything. All ministry is done one way or another in community. We're sharing the tasks, praying together, listening to one another, having coffee with one another, learning from one another, supporting one another, holding one another accountable, crying together, laughing together, and on and on. This is not an option, at least, not if it is the work of Christ.

We've come through some hard challenges over our 54-year history. And looking ahead, we have more to come. For example, I heard this week from several people that Austin Heights has been a topic of concern on local social media among the Right-Wing extremists. This is not the first time we've had zealous religious and nationalistic types concerned about us and it won't be the last time. Seems this goes back at least as far as our New Testament story this morning.

On January 1, 1954, the University of Alabama was playing Rice University in the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. Rice was beating Alabama soundly and Rice tailback Dicky Moegle was running up and down the field for yardage and touchdowns. At one point, Moegle broke free for an apparent 95-yard touchdown run. On the Alabama sidelines stood player Tommy Shiner, who couldn't take it any longer. Coming off the sidelines, he ran out and tackled Moegle. Of course, Alabama was penalized and Moegle given a touchdown.

But you know what? Sometimes we're on the sidelines, we're bystanders, we're tired and overwhelmed, and something happens. Something of God happens and we find ourselves getting involved again.

Are you ready?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.