

“Seeing the Glory of God”
Acts 6:1-9; 7:3, 51-60; John 14:1-12
Easter 5-A, May 18, 2014

It’s highly unlikely that any of us here this morning have ever been offered the gift of \$1 million, but if we ever are it’s not difficult to understand how breathlessly overwhelmed we might immediately become! **But is it any less overwhelming to listen to these magnificent words of our Lord Jesus in our Gospel lesson today, when he says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me, will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father!” (John 14:12)**

It’s quite natural that when we hear these words of Jesus we may think of Jesus’ miracles first. This is the Jesus who healed the sick, who made the blind to see and the lame to walk. This is the Jesus, who not only walked on water but also awakened a few people out of death to new life again. But, let’s remember that these were never Jesus’ chief objectives when he was among us as the Son of God. And doesn’t this become abundantly clear on that day when some dear friends of a certain paralyzed man disassembled the thatched roof over the place where Jesus was standing inside of another man’s house; preaching the good news of God’s kingdom of God?

What is the first thing that Jesus says to **that poor crippled man?** He says to him, **“Son, be of good cheer for your sins are all forgiven you!” (Mark 2:5)**

This statement of Jesus immediately drew some sharp criticism from those who were still blind to Jesus’ true identity in this world! **“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7-8)**

“But Jesus, immediately perceiving in his spirit that they were asking such questions within themselves,” had a follow up question for his opponents that day of his own: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic: ‘your sins are forgiven, or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,’ he said to the paralytic, “I say to you, pick up your bed and go home.” St. Mark further tells us, “And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!” (Mark 2:12)

Jesus made his mission abundantly clear to us when he said, **“The Son of Man is come to seek and save that which is lost!” (Luke 19:10)**

And yet, at least some of those first disciples of Jesus, now become apostles, following the events of that first Pentecost Sunday, did have miraculous healing powers available to them, didn’t they? Why it is even said of Stephen, an ordained deacon in the early Church, who dies as the first Christian martyr; in Acts 6 and 7 today, that: **“Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people!”**

I don’t know what all those **“great wonders and signs”** entailed. But I do know that one of my favorite sections of the book of Acts is chapter 5:15-16, where St. Luke tells us that **these newly Spirit-filled disciples, now become apostles, following that first Pentecost Sunday—also were doing many signs and wonders among the people, especially in that part of the Temple grounds in Jerusalem that was named “Solomon’s Portico.”**

The leader in all this exciting work that was taking place down at the temple, St. Luke tells us, was none other than the Apostle Peter, who was once so afraid of Jesus’ opponents that he even outright denied ever having known our Lord at all, three times, on the eve of Lord’s crucifixion. But all of that has now been drastically changed because of the Spirit’s coming upon Peter and the other disciples in full force.

In Acts 5:15-16 we read, *“That people carried the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and pallets, so that as Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them! The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem bringing their sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were healed!”* Luke also tells us in Acts 19:11 that God *“did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul.”* The Apostle Paul was so revered and trusted as a healer *that people took handkerchiefs or aprons that touched his body to the sick, and,”* to quote St. Luke verbatim: *“Diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them!”*

I am certainly not suggesting that every Christian in the early church had these miraculous powers available to them, but certainly some of those first apostles did. And yet, it also seems *“that the number of these miracles decreased as the need for them to substantiate the Word of God also decreased”* (Gary Baumler, THE PEOPLE’S COMMENTARY, JOHN, CPH 2005, page 199).

When Jesus says, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father,”* he is not speaking so much about the *“type”* of work that his followers would one day do, as he is speaking about the ever widening sphere of influence that the early church’s witness to the Gospel would have upon the world in terms of outreach efforts. The early church’s witness to the Gospel would be far more substantial in terms of the number of people that could also be reached with the message of Christ, his life, death and resurrection!

I like what **James Montgomery Boice** has to say about these words of Jesus in his commentary on the Gospel of John. Boice writes: *“When you realize that when Jesus left this scene, committing his Gospel to a little group of eleven men in order that they might carry it to the ends of the earth, at that time, the whole world, with the exception of a few people living in Israel, was lost in the darkness of heathenism. But in 300 years, Christianity closed nearly all the pagan temples of the Roman Empire and numbered its converts by the millions! And down through the centuries the Risen Christ still carries on this great ministry!”* (JOHN, Volume 4, page 1094).

What was Jesus’ chief objective during the time of his earthly ministry among us?

Listen precisely to what Jesus says on the day after he fed the 5000! In **John 6:38**, our Lord says: *“I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father—that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day!”*

In these words of our text Jesus gives us some real insights as to what it might mean for any one of us to genuinely be a Christian in this world today, and these are evidences that we can certainly see alive in that first Christian martyr Stephen in the words of our First Lesson today.

1. STEPHEN WAS COMMITTED TO FEEDING THE HUNGRY.

The early church knew that those who professed to be the true followers of Jesus Christ in this world, needed to demonstrate that love to others in concrete actions. And in the early church there was a concern to minister unto widows and orphans, to address the needs of the poor.

But continuing to be sinners, even as the Gospel was calling upon them to be saints, we can also see that the Christian ideals which the first Christians aspired were not necessarily realized in their own lives. In our first lesson today from Acts 6, when the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians were

claiming that the Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians were receive larger allotments of the money set aside to care for widows in their need, than were the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians!

The problems that plagued the early church were not unlike problems that often plague organizations today—a mixture of logistical problems and lingering resentments.

This is when the Apostles are led by the Holy Spirit to appoint seven men, known by everyone to have sterling reputations, to serve on the first board of deacons there at the church in Jerusalem.

“Besides,” the apostles exclaim, *“it wouldn’t be right for us to take our attention away from preaching the Gospel to wait on tables.”* You don’t have to be an ordained clergyman to distribute food fairly among the disadvantaged!

2. STEPHEN WAS ALSO A MAN, IN WHOM OTHERS OBVIOUSLY COULD SEE THE RISEN CHRIST ALIVE AND WELL.

The apostles said, *“Pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty!”* (Acts 6:3)

Perhaps people could simply look at **Stephen and see that there was a presence, a power, a purpose about his life—that caused other people to stand up and take notice of him**—attributing such a uniqueness about him as nothing that could be explained in any other way apart from the fact that Christ was now living inside of him!

3. STEPHEN WAS ALSO A MAN WHO WAS WILLING TO SPEAK FORTH THE WORD OF GOD—THE STORY OF GOD, OF ISRAEL, OF GOD’S COMING TO REVEAL HIMSELF TO THE WORLD ABOVE ALL IN THE GIFT OF HIS SON JESUS CHRIST

Stephen talks about God’s past dealings with the people of Israel, how God had adopted them to be his own covenant nation, that through them he might one day bring the Christ of God to the world through them.

4. STEPHEN WAS ABLE, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, TO REMAIN CALM IN THE FACE OF A GROWING HOSTILITY THAT WAS BEING EXPRESSED AGAINST HIM.

Anybody can be a Christian when they are going with the flow and swimming with the stream. But what’s it like when people hate you? What’s it like when people undermine you, despise you and make up stories about you, plot your demise, and maybe even rejoice in your downfall?

There is something about the way that Stephen responds to all of the hostilities being hurled in his direction that should not go unnoticed by us this morning! That even when his opponents were doing everything in his power to discredit him, St Luke tells us in **Acts 6:15: “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel!”**

Jesus says that the One who believes in him will not only do the things that he does, but even greater things than that...and isn’t this to be able to see now already, at times, the glory of God!

Do you want to see the glory of God?

Do you want to go that little bit further? Do you want to go beyond the bare necessities of discipleship, until you go into new territory with God as your guide? Do you want to see the glory?

Let me tell you a story: **Several weeks ago I came across a true story of something absolutely remarkable that took place in the world of track and field at the men's marathon at the Helsinki Olympics way back in 1952.** The marathon traditionally took place on the last day of the games, after all the other track events had been completed.

In the 1952 Games, the most impressive runner by far was a man from Czechoslovakia named Emil Zatopek. He had already won the five-thousand meter gold medal and the ten-thousand meter gold medal, earlier in the week. But far from being exhausted by his achievements, he thought he'd go a step further and try out his hand at running in the marathon. **You see, he wasn't satisfied with doing exactly what he had planned to do. He wanted to see the glory.** And he had never even run a marathon before, but he thought, I have a chance that few people ever get, so I am going to take it. **Around halfway through the marathon, a bunch of runners broke away from the rest of the great crowd of men running in this marathon and among them was Zatopek.** Before long, there were only two runners left fighting for the lead. One of them was a man from Great Britain, the world recorder holder named Jim Peters, and the other was this man from Czechoslovakia named Emil Zatopek. About 15 miles into the marathon, Zatopek turned to Peters and asked him, "Is this about the right pace, or should we be going faster?"

Peters, half-joking and half-serious replied to Zatopek by saying, "Ideally, we should be going faster!" So Zatopek went faster and ended up winning the race by about a half mile's distance in front of Jim Peters, even breaking the world record by a full six minutes.

Zatopek could have stuck to the original plan to go to the Men Olympics there in Helsinki in 1952 and to achieve his goal of winning two gold medals; one for winning the five-thousand meter race and the other for winning the ten-thousand meter race, but he wanted to go further and further. He could have run a conservative marathon, with it being his first. But he had caught a glimpse of something extremely special, that no one else had ever achieved before—his hope of winning all three races at those 1952 games! No one had ever done it before!

He wanted to experience the glory of achieving that goal and you can almost hear him thinking to himself about 16 miles into that marathon, "You will do greater things than these!" He wanted to see the glory. And he discovered resources and strength and a certain amount of resilience within him that he never knew he even had.

Like Emil Zatopek, Stephen went beyond just being a Christian. Yes, he was committed to feeding the hungry! Yes, that was basic! Yes, he resigned himself to Jesus' Lordship so that God might meet the needs of others through him. And it is no longer really just Stephen who is living, but the living Christ who was now living in him! And yes, Stephen even was able, St. Luke tells us in our first lesson today to face the hatred and hostility that others were exhibiting towards him while, remarkably enough, wearing the face of an angel! This is what the Bible says!

But Stephen didn't just want to be a Christian! He wanted to see the glory of God! And St. Luke tells us that Stephen did see the glory of God, while he was still in this world, alive and witnessing to the Gospel to his contemporaries, many of whom were outright opposed to everything he said and everything he stood for! St. Luke tells us in verse 55, ***"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and SAW THE GLORY OF GOD, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, 'I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'"***

Stephen saw the glory. To see the glory he had to be prepared to go beyond the basics of discipleship. He had to go out of his comfort zone. He had to be ready and willing, if need be, to die as Jesus had died. Look at the way Stephen dies! He is surrounded by the Jerusalem Council. Jesus was

surrounded by the Jerusalem Council. Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. Stephen's dragged out of the city. Jesus was led out of the city. As Stephen dies, he prays, ***"Lord receive my spirit, do not hold this sin against these men!"*** And Jesus prays, ***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing!"***

Stephen died like Jesus! That's when he saw the glory. Stephen's life teaches us that being a Christian means you may spend some time feeding the hungry and letting God do beautiful things through your while you are here below, such beautiful things that others will also hopefully take notice and glorify the Father in heaven because of you! Being a Christian means speaking the Word of God, at times, to others, in word and deed. Yes, like Stephen you may live a life that so infuriates other people that they will harass you and attack you. But maybe also, just like Emil Zatopek, you will realize that God, in the gift of your faith to you, and in the revelation of himself to you—has given you something special, and you will feel a call to seek out that little bit more!

God's call to every one of us this Easter season is for us to learn to mean what it lives so closely to the very boundary between life and death that we can see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God already now!

Isn't this when those words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning will take on for you personally the greatest and deepest meaning for you possible? ***"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also!"*** (John 14:1-3)

A little silver-haired lady calls her neighbor and says, "Please come over here and help me. I have a killer jigsaw puzzle, and I can't figure out how to get started."

Her neighbor asks, "What is it supposed to be when it's finished?"

The little silver haired lady says, "According to the picture on the box, it's a rooster."

Her neighbor decides to go over and help with the puzzle.

She lets him in and shows him where she has the puzzle spread all over the table.

He studies the pieces for a moment, then looks at the box, then turns to her and says,

"First of all, no matter what we do, we're not going to be able to assemble these pieces into anything resembling a rooster."

He takes her hand and says, "Secondly, I want you to relax. Let's have a nice cup of tea, and then," he said with a deep sigh: "Let's put all the Corn Flakes back in the box."

Seeing the glory of God! Yes, there are times when through eyes of faith people like us might be able to see it, to some degree, already in this life. But God assures that we will certainly see it one day for ourselves in heaven in our Gospel lesson today: John 14:1-14. ***"Let not your hearts be troubled..."***

One day Jesus said to his disciples, ***"Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!"***²⁴ ***For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it!"*** (Luke 10:23-24)