



# Weekly Update

## April 18-24

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### Acts 6:1-7:2, 44-60, the selection of Stephen, his trial, and his murder

The Kingdom of God is like a dandelion. When you blow on it, it appears to be nothing but a dead stem, but in reality the seed has been scattered so that it will multiply on the earth.

Saul watched as Stephen died and soon thereafter began the first persecution of the church, scattering the first followers of Christ into the rest of Judea and Samaria. Saul's vicious pursuit of those who claimed to follow Christ pushed the disciples out of Jerusalem. The next stories are of Philip in Samaria, and next week will read about Philip and the eunuch who takes the gospel to Ethiopia.

This moment of brutal violence revealed the extremes that those in power were willing to go to keep their grip. It was a sanctioned act of violence, approved by those in power. And what did Stephen do to justify this act? He was accused of speaking against the Temple, threatening to tear it down.

His defense was a retelling of the Biblical story. He recounted to the council the story of God called Abraham to faith, used the treachery against Joseph for good, and empowered Moses for liberation. He reminded them of the people's continued failure to live up to their end of the covenant, and argued that the Temple was never a place of God's righteousness because of their continued faithlessness. So calling for the Temple's destruction was not blasphemy, but another chapter in the story of the people's failure to live according to God's law.

It was a harsh word that Stephen delivers to the council, and they are enraged by it, but when he declares that he could still see Jesus, they are moved to violence. It is important to note that Stephen was Jewish. He was including himself in the history of the people's failure. He was telling the story of their family, but in the end he declared that they had a chance to make it all right, but that the council had failed to do so. It was a tremendous act of courage that Stephen stands before these powerful men and calls them to account. He cries out for justice and is met with overwhelming force. In death he models Christ's own death, by signaling forgiveness and resignation.

Stephen's death is tragic and remarkable. Tragic because it signalled the depth of the addiction to violence that those in power were gripped with. It is all the more tragic because the

mix of power and violence has not changed much since this act 2000 years ago.

It was remarkable because Stephen stood firm in the midst of the violence. Only

a short time before he was called into leadership. In the beginning of chapter 6 he (along with five others and Philip, whom we will hear more about next week) is selected to serve a very practical role. The early community of Jews following Christ were experiencing division based on language and culture.

To solve their problem, they called leaders to make sure that the food and common resources were shared equitably. Stephen was chosen to serve food so that the apostles could keep teaching and preaching. Yet here Stephen takes on the role of the apostle, sharing the good news boldly.

The story begins with a community trying to figure out how to live equitably and fairly across cultural and linguistic divides. It moves through the selection of a few leaders who are called to perform a specific task. Yet the Holy Spirit moves in ways no one anticipates and takes these deacons to new and powerful roles.

In the end, it is the Spirit that has done all the action. The Spirit called Stephen. She moved Stephen to great signs and wonders. She empowered Stephen to speak boldly. In the end, it was the Spirit that received Stephen in love and grace. We the Church must continue to listen to the Spirit, moving boldly and unexpectedly and calling us all to signs, wonders, proclamation, sacrifice, and forgiveness.



Stoning of Stephen by Rembrandt (1625)