



“Determined to Be Faithful”
Scripture – Acts 7:55-60
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 10, 2020

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had such a tight connection with God that we clearly understood what God wants us to do in each situation? It is maddening to face a dilemma and be clueless as to what God envisions as our best option. Can you recall being in a quandary and hoping God would give you a clear sign? “God, which college should I attend? Is this the right person to marry? Should I take this job or pursue another? Which medical procedure will have a best outcome? God, just make it clear what I should do.”

Wouldn't life be easier if God cut through the fog and clarified divine expectations? The more I understand the Bible, the more I am convinced that the answer to that question is “No.” If we had an open channel of communication with God, life would be far more challenging.

Today's passage is a case in point. Stephen, an early follower of Jesus, discerns the whispers of God. He faithfully follows God's guidance and as a result... Well, listen for yourself. Today's New Testament lectionary reading comes from the seventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Our passage marks one of its dramatic scenes:

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

What triggered this gruesome moment when Stephen was stoned to death? It was a speech he delivered, the gist of which was that the Hebrew people were a stiff-necked people. They stubbornly resisted God's guidance time after time. Stephen pointed out that when Moses liberated them from the Egyptians and led them through the wilderness, the people complained every step of the way. Further, they opposed every prophet who tried to lead them back to God.

Those hearing Stephen's speech were put on edge when he held up a mirror displaying their ugly tendency to defy God's messengers. Then, when Stephen accused them of thwarting God's purpose by betraying Jesus, they went berserk. They grabbed Stephen, dragged him outside of the city walls and stoned him to death. I will always remember our band of pilgrims reading this passage where it happened – just outside of Stephen's Gate in the old city of Jerusalem.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr, but many more would follow. Being faithful to God can be risky.

In every time and in every culture, there will be moments when being faithful to Christ will create a flash point. People feel threatened when their viewpoint is challenged and they are accused of being an obstacle to the way of God. At such junctures, one must decide whether to back down in the face of opposition or take a stand for what is right.

A few months ago, the mayor of Tulsa was at his favorite breakfast diner with his wife and two children. He was about to take a bite of his pecan waffle when a woman marched up to his table and unloaded on him. Pointing her finger, she “lit into him about his decision to reopen an investigation into a century-old race massacre. ‘You’re doing this to make white people feel bad,’ the woman said...The waitress tried to get the woman to sit down, but she refused. She was angered by the city’s plan to unearth bodies from one of the worst episodes of racial violence in U.S. history...The white Republican mayor in deeply red Oklahoma tried to explain...I’m not trying to make white people look bad. I’m just trying to find the truth.”¹

Incredibly, his father had been the president of the Tulsa Historical Society years before and his father had never heard of the 1921 massacre until someone brought it to light in 2001. The young mayor said that some people had remarked that it was unusual for a white Republican mayor to focus on this, but he responded, “I don’t view this from a partisan standpoint. I view it as basic decency.”²

Sometimes when we are at odds with others, we bite our lips. We go along to get along. God does not expect us to be constantly confrontational. However, God *does* expect us to stand up for what is right and decent. Or, as the Scriptures often put it: what is just and merciful.

This is vital for us to remember as the Covid-19 crisis fuels arguments over the right time to reopen the economy. There is no doubt that our declining economy is extracting a heavy toll. Some of you feel the pinch. I understand. Both of our daughters have lost 80 percent of their income. Camilla and I will gladly dip into our retirement savings to insure that they will be able to pay their mortgages and other living expenses. Many of you will do the same. However, I fear for the many who have no family help and must put their lives in jeopardy to continue to pay their bills.

Did you hear about Jason Hargrove? He had to keep driving a Detroit city bus to feed his family. He asked for a plastic shield to block the coughs of passengers, but the city was slow to respond. At the end of each day he removed his clothes the moment he stepped in his front door; then went directly to the shower. It was not enough. Mr. Hargrove died of Covid-19. There are millions of workers like him who must show up for work ill or not, to keep a roof over their heads. For those of us who have good incomes and nice homes and health care insurance, it is deceptively easy to ignore the desperate plight of the millions who do not.

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the cavernous chasm between the wealthy and the poor. I am nearly as frightened by the extreme imbalance of wealth in our country as I am by this deadly virus. To be fair, a few extremely wealthy individuals have set up foundations to fight diseases and fund housing for the poor, but some of the wealthiest have become ludicrously out of touch. “Billionaire David Geffen recently posted on Instagram that he planned to ride out the present crisis on his 454 foot yacht, adding, ‘I’m hoping everybody is safe.’”³ How thoughtful of him. I pray his words will not become the equivalent of what led to the French Revolution’s “Let them eat cake.” When one percent of households possess more wealth than the bottom 80 percent, things are wildly out of balance and the conditions are ripe for revolt. Might the current crisis be the match that ignites the blaze? That is as worrisome as the virus itself.

Ditto for the attitude of a wealthy former governor who just a few days ago said that we should reopen the economy because “there are going to be deaths no matter what.” Then he compared it to the loss of lives during the two World Wars, saying it is a “sacrifice” Americans must make for our way of life.⁴ Putting your life on the

line to stop the iron fist of Fascism is hardly equivalent to risking lives in order to get businesses open a few months earlier than they would otherwise. I am all in favor of wise steps to gradually reopen businesses. But to suggest that people need to die so that we can get back to dining out and traveling reveals an astonishingly callous character.

I am extremely proud of our members' awareness of the inequities. More than one hundred of our members and dozens of our neighbors have provided more than 10,000 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, plus eggs and fruit and other essentials to local feeding ministries. Further, I know of at least one business owner in our church family who is continuing to pay employees despite losing money. Such efforts are matched by many people of faith across the land. My hope is that we can do more as a nation. Can we focus our vision on God's dream of a country that is merciful and just? Can we create a workplace environment in which no business withholds an employee's pay because he stays home when he is ill, rather than bringing his disease to work and spreading it to others?

Most developed nations guarantee the availability of affordable housing to its citizens. If we are the wealthiest country on the planet, why can't we do the same? Virtually every other developed nation guarantees reliable access to health care.⁵ Why can't we do the same? These are some of the major moral issues of our day and followers of Jesus need to know where they stand.

In my late twenties – a very long time ago – I took an Outward Bound course in the mountains of North Carolina. The course description said it would involve backpacking, a rope course, rock climbing, and other strenuous activities. In bold letters, the registration said **“Don't even think about attempting this if you are not in excellent physical shape.”**

Thirteen of us – nine men and four women – showed up for the challenge. Our two male instructors were physically fit 30somethings who had conditioned their bodies by running up steep mountain paths and rock climbing sheer face walls. The course was true to advertising – rugged and challenging. When it ended, I had a new appreciation of how you can accomplish something that you first believed impossible. I already had a taste of it through sports. Screaming football coaches can motivate you to exceed your expectations. When you think you are on the verge of exhaustion and cannot take one more step, a cursing coach can prod you to run another mile.

However, the Outward Bound experience was not simply about pushing yourself beyond physical boundaries. It was focused on surpassing mental barriers and overcoming fear. Two examples. One day our instructors took us to a 12 foot high wooden wall. The boards were smooth, so it was impossible to gain a hand or toe hold on the wall. They told us that our challenge was to get everyone in our group over the wall and to the other side. They said, “Talk about your strategy, and then let us know when you're ready.”

There wasn't much to talk about. We would need to have our largest person on the bottom. A tall person would need to stand on his shoulders and pull himself to the top of the wall. Then, from the top, he would help pull others over. We were determined to do the best we could, but we could not see how we could get the final person over a wall that high. Michael Jordan was not part of our group. When we said we were ready, the instructors said, “All right, until you get everyone over the wall, there will be no more talking.” We started pointing fingers at who should go first, second, and so on. And as unbelievable as it seemed at first, we managed to get every single person over that wall. I don't remember how, but we succeeded.

The second challenge involved overcoming fear. Each of us had to walk across a 25 foot long beam that was six inches wide. Had that beam been two feet off the ground, it would have been a cake walk. But this beam was lodged between two trees, fifty feet off of the ground! Even though we had a safety rope attached to our back, it was terrifying. Yet each of us set our minds to doing it. Battling the fear and making it to the other side was

incredibly rewarding. Each of us discovered that when we were faced with something frightening, we could muster more courage than we thought possible.

You do not have to rough it for two weeks in the mountains to discover these two vital lessons. These are intrinsic elements of religious faith. God can help you accomplish more than you imagine and summon more courage than you think. This current global pandemic is testing us on each of these fronts. My hope is that as we emerge from this crisis, we will have the courage and the determination to make our nation more just and merciful than ever before. This crisis is giving us an opportunity to create a different future: one that overcomes the bitter divisiveness of the past few years and one in which every person is valued as a child of God.

NOTES

1. DeNeen L. Brown, "Seeking the Truth about Tulsa," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 15, 2020.
2. Ibid.
3. The Editorial Board of *The New York Times*, "The America We Need," April 9, 2020.
4. Former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie speaking on CBS News.
5. The Editorial Board of *The New York Times*, "The America We Need," April 9, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Jon McPheeters

Dear Lord, on this Sunday we lift to you prayers of thanksgiving for mothers and for motherhood in all its varied forms. We give thanks for our own mothers. Some who are still with us and those who have passed on. The mothers of our children and grandchildren. Foster mothers. Surrogate mothers. Sister mothers. Step mothers. Mothers to be and others who would be mothers. Mothers who live nearby and those far away. Mothers who we can see, but not hug, and mothers we are not allowed to see given the new normal.

Mother God: Guide us. Awaken us. Refresh us. Comfort us. Illuminate for us this day, those roles that mothers have played and continue to play, in each of our lives.

Lord God, sometimes we feel so alone. So unprepared. So exhausted.
Sometimes we feel forgotten and stepped upon.
Remind us to breathe, to look both outward and inward.
Lord, remind us that in praying we are doing your will.

Help us to prepare for each day, knowing you are leading us, speaking to us, and guiding us with love. And help us to follow you.

We get lost in news stories that make us weep and grow sad, reminding us of so many vulnerabilities and so much human loss. Help us to lay down our fears and burdens, to find sleep, to have healing dreams that connect us to you and all of your creation.

Help us to be aware of our own abilities to care for those who work in fire and rescue, emergency rooms and intensive care units, manufacturing facilities and distribution networks, grocery stores and food processing plants, and so many other front lines in this pandemic world. We give thanks for them all and God we ask for your compassion. Sustain those who give of the mind, body, and spirit to care, to heal, and restore.

We give thanks for those who donate their money, time and talents, volunteering in all manner of ways, in shelters, at food banks, tending to neighbors, providing care to children of essential workers; making sandwiches, sharing music, sheltering at home. A little goes such a long way. Help us to be present in those moments. Lord, give us strength in our desire to do everything we can. Love us when we feel we can't do enough.

Help us to remember those who are forgotten, the “not newsworthy,” those who have no shelter and not enough food, those in the “wrong” country. Break down our prejudices and hatred, shake apart our sinfulness and false righteousness that have nothing to do with compassion and good will.

May the masks we wear speak of our love and care – a symbol of our openheartedness. Teach our eyes to smile, our eyebrows to lift in welcome, and remind us to wave and yell hello from windows. Remind us that a virus can cause suffering and that we can remove suffering in so very many ways. Create in us awareness and right action.

Lord, we lift up our mighty resource of prayer using the words that Jesus gave us praying

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Adapted in part from “World News This Week in Prayer — Thursday, April 30, 2020”; <http://worldinprayer.org>.