

*Every week in the nave below the nave, the students of the Christian formation program meet together to share a common meal and sing and pray together as a faith community. One Sunday I noticed there was a student who, after finishing his breakfast did not gather with the others in the common worship space, but instead, planted himself firmly in the hallway, arms crossed refusing to enter. The children began singing (love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and too all be kind.” As we sang I could detect over the piano and guitar, a faint but fierce parent child power struggle in progress in the hallway.*

*After the service, his mother sought me out to explain. He says he “can’t go in there!” she said. He is adamant. “He says he can’t go in there because when he does he can’t get the songs out of his head all week! Like on the soccer field!”*

The next week after a slightly less fervent struggle the student finished breakfast and joined the worshipping community. After the peace, when the others headed to class this student lingered. “What’s goin on?” I asked him. “Its these songs,” he blurted,. “I can’t get them out of my head. They are in there all the time, like when I am on the soccer field and it is totally embarrassing. Confused, I asked him, “if its in your head, why would you be embarrassed? They can’t see what is in your mind. And then, he confessed, under his breath, and out of earshot, “Sometimes”, he said, “sometimes, I sing them out loud.”

Today is the first day of the Jewish feast of Passover, the time when Jewish families and communities gather to remember and reclaim the story of the Exodus. Most of us know this story quite well, but it can't hurt us to revisit it, in a limited for, in consonance with our Jewish brothers and sisters right now.

As the story goes, in approximately 1200 BCE, the Pharaoh of Egypt, had enslaved some 600, 000 Jews. Threatened by them, he initiated, preemptively, a policy of genocide, drowning all newborn Jewish males, and holding the rest in captivity forcing them to labor as masons.

Pharaoh was given multiple opportunities by God to release them. 10 times God sent a plague to encourage him to . "Let my people go." Frogs, locusts, rivers of blood, diseased cattle, lice, (all things we want to hear about right after breakfast.) And the tenth plague, was the destruction of the firstborn in every household in Egypt. God's instruction to the Israelites that night was to mark the sides of their door lintel so the angel of death would pass over Jewish houses, and their sons would not be taken. And so it was. And that night Pharaoh released the Jews from her captivity, the night of the death of his firstborn son.

As they headed out of town, (carrying back wages in goods and gold) Pharaoh had a change of heart and went out after the Jews, who by this time were crossing into the Red Sea. Once through to the other side they looked back and saw the Egyptians drown. And thus the Israelites were delivered from their slavery in Egypt and freed to be the people of God.

This is the story which is recited by Jews together, everywhere during the season of Passover. And as the story is recited and revisited, Jewish believers charge themselves with the task of re-living it as if they were the ones being liberated from Egypt. There is a saying in the Jewish community—God took the Jews out of Egypt, but didn't take Egypt out the Jews. Rehearsing and reliving this story challenges believers to examine that ways in which this is still true. In what ways are we still enslaved? In what ways are we still enslaving and destroying others?

Ironically, because of the different ways the Jewish and Christian calendars are organized, this year's Passover takes place in the middle of our Eastertide, a season during which we do not include an Old Testament reading. What our lectionary offers us, in stead is a reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. In this case, the event of the stoning of Stephen. Stephen, the first deacon, was ordained by the Apostles (Peter, John and company). With the Apostles, he performed signs and miracles, pointing to and confirming the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the early Church. Stephen was said to be a man of great wisdom and to be filled with the Holy Spirit to such a degree that even his enemies noted that "his face shone like the face of an angel.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was unwavering in faith to the point of death by stoning. He was so committed to emulating the life of Christ, Jesus the servant, the miracle worker, the prophet who died for his friends, that he followed this path to the point of death. As he died he, like Jesus, asked God to forgive his attackers and to receive his spirit. Stephen gave up his will, and embraced the will of God, unwavering in his belief that the life to be

found in Christ, at one with the Father, saturated in the Spirit, can only be lived in the way that Christ lived. The Christian life: lived in service of God and others, in death to self and embrace of divine love. Life lived in the name and heart of Jesus, the firstborn son of God who was *not* passed over, the paschal lamb who laid down his life for his friends.

To us, this sort of martyr faith likely seems remote and extreme. Our world is not Stephen's world. We are not in a situation where confessing faith in Christ puts us in this kind of danger. Or are we?

What would happen if we placed our commitment to Christ above a soccer game, or even a *practice*? Would we not incur the wrath of the local coach and the disdain of parents all over town? What if our Christian values spurred us to object to and actively combat exploitative company practices, like outsourcing; or limiting employee hours to keep them just under the number at which we would have to insure them.. Would we sacrifice a promotion for our faith? Would we risk compromising our status in the community? Would we be willing to not place our kids in the most prestigious schools, or risk them not making the team in order to drench them in a counter-cultural community which might shape their values and their futures, what price are we willing to pay for Christian formation, theirs and our own. Would we be open to financial hardship, or even the inconvenience of redistributing resources that are ours, for the pursuit of unity with God in Christ? What would people say? And can we take the hit? Stones are still threatened and thrown. Do we have the guts to absorb with gladness the consequences for a life lived on a different plane, played

by the rules of self giving, sacrifice, and valuing the other more than ourselves? Played by the rules of Christ. Christ's way. The way of life.

This is indeed a tall order. Risky and daunting. The magnitude of the challenge may call us to discount the whole project, Why try when we don't seem to stand a chance? It is into this conflicted place that the Jesus of the Gospel of John speaks..."Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. In my father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so I would have told you. I go before you to prepare a place for you." God promises to walk before us into these challenging environments and choices. I go before you, to the cocktail party, to the conference room, to the staff meeting. I am preparing the way for you. I am with you.

Stephen carried this confidence. He knew in his pores that the way had been prepared for him. He had faith that God was present and faithful.

But confidence in God's presence is not all he had. Stephen was not a superman of faith, flying solo—"Just me and God." No, Stephen faced his challenges as part of a community, a body of believers, deeply committed to God and to one another. They ate together, they worshipped together, the performed miracles and other ministry together, each working according to his spiritual gifts. They shared all things in common- This was the quality of his community and it empowered him, to go boldly forward in faith.

The other thing he carried was the story of the people of God. It buoyed and emboldened Stephen, this Story he carried in his soul and heart and mind. He carried the story of his scriptures, the Hebrew Bible, what we

know as the Old Testament. For Stephen, the Story of Israel, continued in the man Jesus, the promised messiah whose resurrection and ascension liberated humanity from death, onto the Divine gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, lived and actualized through the apostolic presence and work. He knew it by heart. It was part of him. It was in the context of that story that he understood his call to be like Christ.

And we share this call. We consciously embraced and promised to commit ourselves to being remade in the image of God at our Baptism, at our confirmations, every week in the reciting of the creed. While we are removed in time from these witnesses to and direct experiences of power and miracle, we do have right here and now, many of Stephen's other faith resources.

For starters we have one another. We may have a long road to hoe to become the kind of community the first century Christians were. But there are seeds and if we tend them, there is no reason God will not bring the growth.

The second thing we have is Stephen's story. And the stories of all the saints who have gone before us. Records of enslaved lives, liberated and transformed.

Finally, we have the exact same Gospel story that Stephen did. Deeply rooted in the repeated wooing and rescue of Israel, moving through the life teaching and miracles of Christ, through his death, resurrection and ascension and finally, Pentecost, the birthday of the Church.. We hear this

grand narrative every week in the liturgy of the word. We read it at home in our Bibles (that's allowed you know) We sing it through hymns, and lean into it our prayers. This is the story we physically enact every week in the celebration of the holy Eucharist. It is as much a part of us, of our common life together, as it was for Stephen and the apostles.

This community, this story, this place is the source, the mother lode of resources for the lives of faith we seek to live. It is where we suck the story into our beings. It is where we lean into radical, countercultural love. And as we take our liberated, resurrected souls back out of this place, into the board room. Into the shopping mall, the gym, and the cocktail party, we just may find that our choices are changing, flowing not from our previous slavery to the gods of this age, but rather from a commitment to a higher standard of love. When we see ourselves becoming remade into the image of God in Christ, infused with the faith guts of Stephen, living from a set of inexplicably remade values—perhaps then, we might have the courage to move confidently in the world as followers of Christ and to sing, yes, even on the soccer field, to sing our Christian song out loud.