

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THROWING STONES
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First Presbyterian Church
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Acts 6:8-15, 7:51-8:1

A man was walking across a bridge one day when he came across another man standing on the edge, about to jump. "Stop," he cried. "Don't jump!"

"Why shouldn't I jump?" asked the other man.

"Because there's so much to live for," replied the first.

"Oh yeah, like what?"

"Well," said the first man, "are you atheist or religious?"

"Religious."

"Me, too! Are you Christian or Jewish?"

"Christian."

"Me, too! Are you Orthodox or Evangelical?"

"Evangelical."

"Me, too! Are you part of the Original Evangelical Church, or the Reformed Evangelical Church?"

"The Reformed Evangelical Church."

"Me, too! Are you a part of the Reformed Evangelical Church, reformation of 1879, or the Reformed Evangelical Church, reformation of 1919?"

"The Reformed Evangelical Church, reformation of 1919."

And the man replied, "Die, you heretic!" And he pushed him off the bridge.

It is, I grant you, not the gentlest story. But it is also a true story in the way we allow our religious beliefs to separate us from other people. We live in a world where there are religious people who are utterly confident of what they believe, and who are sure that God believes exactly the same way they do, and that those who believe differently are wrong, and that God condemns those others in their wrongness.

A minister friend tells of a meeting of a ministers' association where church leaders from different churches had gotten together. They started talking about books they had read. One minister said he had become interested in mysticism and was reading in that. Some of the other

ministers were of the opinion that mysticism is not Christian, so they dropped out of the group and did not come back.

That's the way we do it sometime: We don't agree with each other, so we'll have nothing to do with one another. And sometimes it is more extreme than that. We don't agree with one another, so we persecute the other, or even kill the other. "Die, you heretic," makes a good punch line for a joke, but it is also the way one faith group too often looks at another.

That is what happened to Stephen, one of the early Gentile Christians. Stephen was a believer in Jesus, and that had made him unpopular with the religious authorities. They called him to account for his beliefs, and Stephen made an impassioned speech that frankly got a little carried away and accused the leaders of being stiff-necked and inflexible. Stephen needed a course in anger management. The not-so-surprising result was that the opponents hauled Stephen out of the city and bombarded his body with stones until he died.

The easy thing would be to denounce those who threw those stones for their frenzied fanaticism. But you know what? They believed they were doing the right thing. The Old Testament had commanded them to stone to death any such blasphemers, and in that way "purge the evil from your land."¹ You let people like Stephen run around saying these things and it would destroy our faith which they cherished. They thought they were doing a good thing. Their way of eliminating the evil was to throw stones. Whoever's got the biggest stone is the winner.

On that day it was the Jews who stoned Stephen. But to the shame of Christians, subsequent history has reversed the situation, so that it is believers in Christ who have persecuted Jews. We have only to think of Torquemada, the leader of the Spanish Inquisition of the 15th century, who persuaded Queen Isabella and her husband King Ferdinand to expel all Jews and Muslims from Spain. Or Martin Luther, the great Reformer, one of whose later and lesser known works was entitled "The Jews and their Lies." Or the American religious leader who famously affirmed a few years ago that "God almighty does not hear the prayer of Jews."²

So here we are, living in a world where the pattern seems to be that one faith group separates or persecutes or kills those whose beliefs differ from their own. Whoever's got the biggest rock wins. Die, you heretic! Isn't there another way?

Perhaps there is, and it is Stephen at the moment of his death who points the way. As he is dying, Stephen prays to Christ. What would you pray under such circumstances—Lord Jesus, send down a legion of angels to smite the enemy? But Stephen's prayer is different: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen clearly remembers the example of his Lord, who at his death

¹ Deuteronomy 17:7.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. (New York: HarperCollins 2006), p. 13.

on the cross prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”³ Here is Stephen, and here is Jesus, who sees their executioners not as enemy, but as one to be forgiven. Stephen and Jesus make room for the very ones who take their life.

We don’t throw stones; we make room. We make room for those who differ from us. We practice toleration. We extend hospitality. The one who believes differently from me is not my enemy, but a child of God. I am tolerant in the name of Christ.

To be sure, toleration has a bad name in some circles. There are those who say that toleration is just another name for being wishy-washy. G. K. Chesterton said that “tolerance is the virtue of those who don’t believe anything.”⁴

When our congregation extended hospitality to the local Islamic congregation whose meeting space had been burned in a hate crime, there were those who said that we were extending space to the enemy. Some see tolerance as willing to believe anything, and nothing.

Any you know what? Sometimes people like that have a point. Sometimes people are tolerant because they don’t really believe much of anything themselves, so anything goes—I don’t care. The challenge is to be tolerant on the one hand, and utterly confident of our beliefs on the other. We read today the gospel reading: Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through him. I believe that. I hold to it. I cherish the absolute Lordship of Jesus. And you do, too. That is on the one hand.

But on the other hand, you and I recognize that there are those who do not believe as we do, and we are called to be understanding of their difference from us. And we do it because we know that our own view of the truth is not the final truth. The fact is, friends, that we are sinners saved by the grace of God. My view of the truth, your view of the truth, is not final, because my view is always tainted by my self-interest. I cannot make a god of my truth, because my view is partial and my perspective is limited. We come closest to the truth when we know that we do not have the total truth. I hold fast to the truth that is in Jesus, but because of my sin I am also tolerant whose view of the truth is different from my own.

The easy way would be to separate the people who are right from the people who are wrong, the white hats from the black hats like the old cowboy movies did, the good from the bad. But in reality that’s not so easy to do when weeds and wheat grow together. Who is the good and who is the bad?

Look again at this passage. A young man named Saul is standing there. The ones casting stones get Saul to hold their coats. The passage says unequivocally: “Saul was consenting to Stephen’s

³ Luke 23:34.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Volume 2. p. 237-8.

death.” So that must make Saul a bad guy, right? Well, we know that later on Saul will encounter Christ on the road to Damascus, and will become Paul the apostle, and will be one of the great witnesses for Christ. That’s why we can’t go around labeling this one as friend and that one over there as enemy. Because “every enemy is potentially God’s next apostle.”⁵

Here is where we are: We hold fast in confidence to our faith in Christ, but we are also tolerant of those who differ from us. Nowhere is that two-sidedness of faith expressed more clearly than in a statement approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 2002:

Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. . . . No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. [OK? Do you believe that so far?] Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth” [I Timothy 2:4]. . . . Grace [and] love belong to God, and are not ours to determine.⁶

So here’s an alternative to throwing stones: Do the best you can to have a vision of God’s truth and God’s will, and live your life that way. But because our vision is always limited, be tolerant of those who beg to differ. †

⁵ Thanks to Robert Montgomery, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN.

⁶ “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2002, p. 11-12.