

She is a daughter of the church, in fact, a child of the manse.
Her father has served as a Presbyterian pastor for forty years.
Now she is in love and engaged to be married.
And her parents are delighted.
They love her fiancé.
They long for grandchildren.

And she has kept them waiting so long.
For she has not rushed into marriage.
She is in her mid-thirties.

She wants her father to conduct the service.
Yet he is in a dilemma.
His only authority to conduct a marriage
comes from the Church of Jesus Christ.

But — — she is very clear.
Her wedding service will not be in a church.
And in the service there will be no mention
of “church” or “Jesus” or the “Triune God”.

This child of the church no longer wants
to have anything to do with the church or with Christian faith.
For the church, in her view, —
has excluded, demeaned, written off people
she is sure God would never write off.

So what is this father to do — or say — to his dear daughter?

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The issue that has so riled this young woman
is one that was loose in Jerusalem.
Stephen, one of the first deacons of the church, —
a man, as Luke says, “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”¹
was going about ministry in Christ’s name.

The issue that arose in his ministry was, —
where is God encountered?
Where is access to God and entry into the people of God available?

The charge leveled by some who belonged to the synagogue
was that Stephen along with other followers of Jesus
did not have a legitimate reason to claim
that they were the people of God.
For those members of the synagogue, —
claimed that access to being authentically a part of the people of God
came *only by Moses* — and *by God*.
Moses referred to the law, the *Torah*.

¹ Acts 6:5

And God referred to the place of God's dwelling, in their minds, —
the *Temple* and the religious activity there.

Stephen, “full of grace and power,” —

doing “great wonders and signs among the people” —
was not limiting access to God in that way.

He was bearing witness that in the Risen Jesus, welcome into the realm of God
was extended to the “ends of the earth”²

Stephen did not speak a word against

the law of Moses and the Temple and Temple worship.

But he was *not demanding* that those were the *only way to God*.

Thus, charges were leveled against him.

He was dragged before the religious council — the presbytery of his day —

and accused: “*This man never stops saying things
against this holy place and the law.*”

Where is God encountered?

Where is access to God and entry into the people of God available?

Stephen's accusers were sure.

It was only through their way of law and Temple.

Folks who did not come to God that way

were not ever a part of God's beloved community.

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What we have before us in chapter seven of Acts

is Stephen's self-defense against these charges leveled against him.

And the heart of his claim is that God cannot be kept - trapped — in any place.

As one scholar points out, — relying on the broad biblical story
of God's way with God's people, —

Stephen declares that the *Temple* should *never have been granted
ultimacy* as the way to God.

In fact, he points out that throughout biblical history, —

God had never been confined

to one land or place or structure or way of life.

For God had been present with Abraham *over in Mesopotamia and Haran*.

God had been present to Joseph when he was taken down into *Egypt*.

God had been present with Moses, —

indeed appeared to Moses in the burning bush —

in the *desert* where Moses had had to flee for his life.

All of this presence happened outside the Promised Land.

And the Temple itself — — — ?

Recalling God's objection to David's plans to build him a house, —

Stephen charged, —

² Acts 1:8

*“The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands.”*³

Then Stephen tops off his defense by asserting that
the people’s own ancestors had *resisted the will of God*, —
that will expressed by prophets beyond the confines
of the set structures of the religion of their day.
Those prophets had been the foretellers of the coming Righteous One.
And their ancestors had closed their ears to those prophets.
Now they too, in confining God to *their way and their place*
had resisted God’s Holy Spirit.
In doing so, they had betrayed and murdered
God’s Righteous One when he appeared.

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It was a hard charge that Stephen leveled against his fellow Jews.
He was clearly in the minority believing that access to God
was not confined to Jewish law and the Jerusalem Temple.
And his minority view was a deep threat to the religious majority
who were sure they knew how God was available
and therefore who was in and who is out
of God’s beloved community.

And through the ages the church has often used this speech of Stephen’s
to castigate the Jews and to write them off as an obstinate people.

But let us beware!

For since the days of Constantine, we who are Christian
are not ones holding a minority view, at least in Western culture.
We as the church are the majority, — the dominant religious culture.
And just as did that crowd in Jerusalem when threatened by a minority view, —
we have often reacted with obstinate certainty.
We have tended to claim *we know* — know very well — know very surely
how God is available
and who is in and who is out of God’s beloved community.

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Infuriated by the charge that they had resisted the Spirit of God
the crowd dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him.
And as they did, they tossed their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.
Saul didn’t participate in the stoning of Stephen.
But he stood by, tended the coats, *enabled*, —
yes, even *approved* of the stoning.

Luke tells us little about Saul here.

But reading on we will learn he was a Pharisee, —
a strong defender of the law and the Temple as *the way to God*.
He was an advocate for the majority understanding

³ Sayles, Guy. “Do Not Hold this Sin Against Us”; An Expository Reflection on Acts 6:9-7:60, *Review and Expositor*, 103, Winter, 2006, p. 216

of who had and who did not have access into the people of God.
Saul did not pick up a stone.

But those who did *trusted* him.

They tossed their *coats at his feet*.

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Coats at the feet.

How often have we in the church tended to coats at our feet?

My hometown was a very Protestant place.

No Roman Catholics lived there until a few coal miners with their families
from Eastern Europe moved in.

St. Theresa's, their church, was not formed until I was in the fourth grade.
Growing up in that Protestant culture, I heard all about Roman Catholics.

They prayed to saints, not to God.

They obeyed a Pope in Rome rather than God.

They didn't read the Bible themselves.

Their priests told them what to believe.

Frankly, it seemed clear, they weren't really *Christians* —
God's own people.

And my Presbyterian Church, — — ?

When those first Roman Catholics moved to town, —
the church did nothing to welcome them.

Nothing bad was directly said about them at my church.

But my church also *never called into question*

the abiding attitude in that whole Protestant religious culture
that those Catholics really weren't our brothers, our sisters.

Like Saul, there all of us gathered in my little church were with *coats at our feet*.

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Coats at our feet.

A dear *elder* I knew well from the Myers Park Church in Charlotte
where Margaret and I served, —

became aware that he *had been tending coats at his feet*.

One day he told me I had to read Timothy Tyson's book

Blood Done Sign My Name.

Tyson, in that stunning book which everyone in North Carolina should read, —
tells the tale of the vicious racism that gripped our state in our lifetime, —
the remnants of which still regrettably remain.

The book opens in Oxford, NC in 1970 with an account
of the cold blooded murder of an unarmed black man
by a group of white men.

Tyson tells of the collusion of white citizens and law enforcement officers
to inhibit the perpetrators from facing justice.

And he lays bare the systemic way the white community
continued to oppress the black citizens of this state.
The elder that shared this book with me found it compelling.
But he was very troubled by it.
“I was a leader in the church and the community in those days, Pete,” he said.
“I lived in the biggest city in the state.
I read one of the best newspapers in the state.
I was active in the ministry of the church, —
a church engaged in ministries across the state.
And yet, I, nor as far I know, anyone in my circle in the city or at church
knew anything about what was happening to black folk
in Oxford and across this state.
Like Saul, there this elder and his congregation were, —
standing with coats at their feet.

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We within this church do not pick up the stones.
We do not join the circles of hate talk that literally demean others.
But how often have we been standing with coats at our feet?
By our *silence*, —
by our *desire not to know* what is happening, —
perhaps even by our *tacit approval*, —
how often do we enable the rejection of others to happen?
How often do we enable it to happen
because in our construct of who God is and where God is to be found
and what the path is by which people must come to God, —
a construct we never want challenged, —
we pretty well know who belongs in God’s beloved community
and who does not?

Are coats lying at our feet?

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The young woman wanting to be married
who knows the church so well
sees the coats at our feet.
And because they are there, —
she wants nothing to do with the church anymore.
And maybe you are like her.
Maybe you too spot the complicity of the church
in being *too sure* of God’s ways
and thus *too sure* of who belongs and who does not.
Maybe you too see the ways the church has participated in
or at least enabled the casting out of persons —
persons treasured by God, — persons loved by Jesus the Christ.

Maybe you see the coats lying at our feet
and thus you also are giving up on the church.

Coats do lie at our feet as they lay at the feet of Saul as Stephen was cast out.

But Stephen, as the mob turned against him
and as Saul silently approved what was happening, —
Stephen was full of the Spirit.

And the Spirit moved Stephen to *remain loyal to Jesus alone*
even in the heat of the reaction to him.

And as one person has noted, *loyalty to Jesus and hatred of any human being*
are *incompatible* with each other.⁴

And what is hatred but the writing off of another
as being beyond the grasp of God?

So Stephen prayed.

He prayed, just as his Lord who rejected no one, hated no one, prayed
as he had faced death at the hands of a mob: —

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

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Saul was there with coats at his feet.

Stephen’s prayer was for Saul as well as for the mob.

And Saul — — — .

He remained a persecutor of those led by the Spirit of God for a while.

But then something happened. *God wasn’t finished with Saul.*

Saul was encountered — not in *the* place or by *the* law
where he was certain God was to be found.

He was encountered, struck down, and turned around on a road to a foreign place.

Remember that, especially those of you — those of us —

so disappointed in the church because we know coats are at our feet.

God is *not yet finished with us*. And God *does not hold our sin against us*.

In surprising encounters, —where and when we least expect God, —
God stuns us, and turns us around.

Because that is so, we the church, that has so often had coats at our feet, —
may still become the church that bears bold witness

to the love of Christ which is never bound

to one place, one people, one religion, one way of thinking.

And if I ever have the chance, I’d love to tell that young bride,—

so troubled by how the church has been
that this is indeed true.

Pete Peery, First Presbyterian Church — Asheville
Fifth Sunday of Easter — 20 April 2008

⁴ Sayles, p. 219