

## **Pentecost 18**

**The Rev. Weston Mathews**

**St. Stephen's Church**

**Richmond, VA**

On Thursday afternoon, Betsy Lee came back to my office and said to me, “There is a woman out front who has some questions and a handful of brochures from the Rally Day tables. Would you come and speak with her?”

Now, if you've ever hung around Betsy Lee's desk, you may know that “there is a visitor in the front office” could mean anything from young parents wanting to learn more about Catechesis of the Good Shepherd or Penny's Bible Study to folks asking where to find Yoga or the Contemplative Prayer Group. It's even possible that you might find someone claiming that they rose from the dead who wants to speak with a priest...

So after we exchanged greetings, I found out that this woman had just moved to Richmond with her ten year old son from Northeast China to work at MCV doing cancer research. In China, she explained, it was hard to learn about Christians because churches in her province were difficult to find. She was intrigued by the Christian way of life and mentioned that, here in Richmond, she had heard about St. Stephen's and was glad to find the door was open and people were inside to answer questions.

As one question led to another about our practices, I invited her to walk with me into the church toward our new Baptismal font so she could see some of the symbols of our faith. She was hungry to learn about everything- the water, the windows, the altars, the votive candles and the vigil candle in the Holy Spirit Chapel. She wanted to know about what was in the red books and the blue books and she wanted to know more about the figures in the carvings on the pulpit. In China, she kept reminding me, it was not easy to learn about Christians and what they were like because they are mostly underground so she was fascinated to see a church that was open for her and even had signs on the street corners.

**So, as we were leaving the church together, she asked one last question, “so who was Stephen and why does your church take his name?”...**

This question really brought me up short.

Sometimes when I consider the many privileges I have living in my safe and beautiful neighborhood, I can feel far away from Stephen and the early church of my imagination where, in following Jesus, it was a dangerous thing to pray *for* the authorities instead of praying *to* them as we learn in Paul's First Letter to Timothy.

But, even though her question was difficult, I gave it a shot.

Stephen, I said to her, appears in the Acts of the Apostles as a special servant, a deacon, who gave food and aid to poorer members of the community. Christians, maybe a little bit like ones living in China, were underground in those days and didn't have large buildings like ours. But they quickly became known for how they loved each other. In cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christians offered charity as well as hope. In areas filled with newcomers, strangers, orphans and widows, Christians offered an immediate basis for attachment and expanded sense of family. In places torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. To people facing epidemics and environmental challenges like fire and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.

So prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings for ordinary people, as well as kings in high positions, followed by mutual aid, was a way of embodying the psalmist who says that God truly does take the weak out of the dust, lifts the poor from the ashes, and sets them with the princes of his people.

Stephen was "full of grace and power", as I pointed out on our parish coat of arms, because he was an ordinary man who allowed God to help him perform great wonders and signs reflecting God's love. But he was ultimately stoned to death and became a martyr because he challenged powerful Jewish legal elders in the Sanhedrin with his teachings about Moses and Jesus whom he believed came to fulfill the law of Moses...

**"So", she said, kind of stunned. "He was killed because he challenged the authorities? Why would you name a church after him if giving aid to people and praying for them like Stephen did could lead to death?"...**

In his First Letter to Timothy, Paul's command for us "to make intercessions for everyone," literally translated does not mean making petitions, or saying any words at all. To make intercession literally means "to be with someone on behalf of another."

So when we are asked to make intercessions for everyone and we learn of Jesus making intercession for us to God the Father, it's not Jesus 'talking' to God about us or for us, it is Jesus being intimately close to his Father and carrying us whom he loves on his heart, and into the very heart of God. Real, profound intercession is not a detached un-impassioned shopping list of the needs of the world which it can sometimes feel like, but a profoundly loving and closely holding up of others before God. It is becoming close ourselves to the heart of God in our prayers of loving adoration, and then bringing those we love and long to be healed with us. True intercession, truly being with someone on behalf of another, is being with God with those we care for on our hearts.

Intercessions, like the kind that Stephen made and the one that we make in our prayers, are not disembodied, they are not a list, but they emerge from the loving relationship which we have with God. To be with someone on behalf of another, to hold them then on our hearts before the loving heart of God, is how I see intercession. Often it can be very helpful in my own prayers to use my imagination and to actually spend time holding a person before God and asking for Jesus' healing touch for that person. I often imagine Jesus looking at the person with deep kindness, not just one more sick person, but looking at them, knowing them, loving them as someone unique. I imagine Jesus laying his healing hands upon them, and filling them with new hope and peace...

For our friend from China, I'm afraid that I did not have a satisfactory answer for her last question about why we would name our church after a deacon who was stoned to death. But, more and more, I'm grateful for our unpredictable life all around Saint Stephen's church and for the people who come to see us from around the world to folks just around the corner. I'm grateful for questions that keep coming and I'm grateful for the way we remember the sick, the dead, those in prison, the ones who have just been born and those who are joining in marriage. Life is unpredictable and, in a divided time for our nation and maybe within our own selves, I'm grateful that we pray to God for healing and for all those in authority and for how we keep growing as a people who love someone on behalf another. Amen.