

“SECOND CHANCES”
John 14:1-14; Acts 7:55-60
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The gospel writer Luke, who also wrote the book of Acts, is generally accepted to be the most subtle and elegant of the authors of the New Testament. This morning's story from Acts of the stoning of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is testimony to Luke's skill and theological grace. Here we have a story ostensibly about Stephen, but when we get to its conclusion, Luke draws us a picture in words: those who participated in the stoning laid their coats at the feet of their supervisor, a man named Saul, a character never before introduced into the story. "And Saul approved the killing of Stephen," Luke tells us. Bald, cold words about a dedicated persecutor of the infant church.

It is an entire chapter later when this man Saul is traveling to Damascus to continue his persecution of those who followed "the Way," and we find that this great persecutor of Christians is struck by a light from heaven, and is transformed. He takes a new name, Paul, and over time, he goes on to become the greatest of the apostles, arguably the most significant voice in the whole history of Christianity.

Now a lot of us liberal Christians, we have problems with Paul. He is misogynistic, often inconsistent; and his theology, especially when he finds himself on shaky ground, can be circular, infuriating, and bombastic. Have I left anything out here? Paul's the guy who many of us love to hate, and we get so caught up in reacting to his writings that we forget that Paul's importance to the Christian tradition is not just in his writings, or even in his missionary zeal, in the churches he started. Paul the man is crucial to the Christian story because he stands emblematic of the heart of Christianity. Paul the man is a person whose life was utterly transformed by his encounter with the Risen Christ. He, who once could stand by coldly watching as Stephen was stoned, he, Paul, became not only the great encourager of those facing persecution, but also one who would ultimately give up his own life for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What's most interesting about Paul to me is not so much that he died for his faith, but the fact that when he was transformed by faith, that transformation was complete. Paul, most importantly, is not a captive of his own past. He openly acknowledges who he used to be, but he does not allow himself to be defined by that past or even tormented by it. The gift of new life offered by God: he grabbed hold of it with both hands, let the past be passed, and went on to live life new from that point. How many of us can say the same?

I remember when I served my church in Seattle. There was a four year old boy in the congregation named Kevin, and every Sunday, when he came out of the elevator and into the church foyer—Plymouth has a parking garage underneath it and so most people come up into the church from the elevator—anyway, Kevin would exit the elevator, come up to me, wait for me to give him his weekly hug, and then go off the church school. One Sunday when he came off the elevator I was distracted, talking with someone else. I didn't see him in front of me and didn't give him his morning hug. And what he did about that was to go back into the elevator, and then

come out again. He gave me a second chance to get it right. Which I did. And then it was over. Kevin went off to class and all was good between us. I've thought of that incident over and over again in my life, because I believe that that's what God wants for all of us: that we make mistakes; we start over; and the shadows of our past do not pursue us into our future.

In the church, we're always talking about grace; we talk about forgiveness; we talk about new life. But how many of us really dare to believe it; how many of us act as if we have been made new? Every Sunday in worship, we pray together the prayer of confession. We say aloud that we, both individually and corporately, have made mistakes and that we are sorry. We are told that we are forgiven, that God is willing to put our past in the past, and let us start afresh. But do we take that forgiveness seriously? Are we really ready to put down our burdens of disappointment, shame, and failure? I don't think so. There are a lot of us, myself included, who cling tight to past misdeeds and failures, holding them to ourselves, berating ourselves for them over and over again. Way too often in the middle of the night, I find myself reviewing not only my known failings, but also my list of possible sins. Could I have done this better? Was this or that that I said just plain stupid?

This is not what God wants for us or from us. To become spiritually mature, I am told, is to be able to discern the difference between healthy reflection and self-examination and an obsessive rehashing of the past. Unless we let ourselves become free of what we have been, we can't truly become different people. Paul, the super apostle, stood coldly by as Stephen was stoned; he worked at pulling Christian men and women from their homes and committing them to prison. The Holy Spirit who could transform that man, in God's grace, we are asked to believe that the same Spirit can work in us and help us grow into the people we long to be.

And even as we allow ourselves another chance for our becoming, we must remember to extend that same grace towards others. Change is hard. And beyond ourselves, I think the greatest obstacle to change is the people around us. My daughter Sarah, as many of you know, had a difficult time in high school. She dropped out when she was 15; and though she is now 23, has finished her B.A., and is working towards her Masters Degree in Economics, I always worry about her and school. A week ago, a friend who's only known Sarah for the past two years asked me, "Why do you worry so much about Sarah? She's such a good student." And I had to shake my head and rethink. Because that's the truth now. Sarah has become an engaged, disciplined, and successful student, and I need to let her be that person, not who she was five years ago.

But that's what we do unconsciously as family and friends, anchor people in their past not their present. We have built up a store of memories of a person one way and are slow to change, slow to let them change. Especially when the past has been difficult, we are loathe to let go and believe that things can be otherwise.

But they can be otherwise. Jesus came among us that we might have the gift of new life and have it abundantly. Everything in the gospels points to God's love as that which can transform anything, can move mountains, can move even our reluctant feet. So if we would be faithful, we will allow ourselves to be set free. If we would be faithful, we will allow ourselves and others to grow, to change, to become more and better, truly experience new life. We, like Paul, can cast off whatever in our past binds us from becoming ... what? What and who would you like to be?

How would you change to become more fully a joyful partner of God in God's work, and our work, of healing and reconciling the world? Your past is past. Your sins are forgiven. So lay them down and reach for the future. Thanks be to God. Amen