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Acts 7:54-60

Outward Church: A Posture of Listening

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Today we are finishing the story of Stephen. I had written my sermon for today's service a couple weeks ago, but when I read it this week, it just didn't feel right. I sensed the Lord had a different sermon for me. Today, I'm sharing what the Lord is teaching me through the lens of Stephen's story about the issue of racial justice. I've felt really drained this week. I've felt anger and grief, sadness, despair, as I know many of you have as well. I think the Lord is trying to tell me something. I don't have the answers but I'm trying to open myself up to new possibilities. *I'm trying to take a posture of listening.*

I want to take a posture of listening.

If the Sanhedrin had really listened to Stephen, maybe things would have turned out differently. Stephen is put on trial for crimes he didn't commit. Those who are against him level two charges: 1) that he wants to change Moses' law; and 2) that he wants to destroy the temple (Acts 6:8-15). In response, Stephen preaches a sermon that retells a slew of embarrassing events in the history of Israel. He reminds them of how they've rejected God and his leaders again and again, ultimately rejecting Jesus. He reminds them God doesn't live in a temple and suggests their temple has become idolatrous (Acts 7:1-53). He tries to tell them these things so they'll repent, but they don't want to hear it. *I want to take a posture of listening.*

I don't want to miss what some of my African American brothers and sister in Christ are telling me. They're telling me they don't feel safe, free, or like they really have a fair shot like I do. In this story I'd much rather compare myself to Stephen. He's the hero. He's the martyr. He's the one talking. But I'm not Stephen. I'm one of the Sanhedrin, deciding if I'm going to listen or not. I sense the Lord telling me to *take a posture of listening* because many in the black community have something I need to hear. They're calling me to repent. They're telling me my silence has enabled sin and injustice. My heart is grieved. *I want to hear.*

In his sermon Stephen reminded the Israelites of their low-points to help bring them to repentance. My black brothers and sisters in Christ have recounted my history too.

- *They have reminded me* of 250 years of American slavery from 1619 to 1865.
- *They have reminded me* of 89 years of segregation till 1954 and all the Jim Crow laws that disadvantaged them and their descendants.
- *They have reminded me* of redlining in the 1930s that prevented their grandparents from buying homes and transferring wealth to children and grandchildren, even in and around Boston.
- *They have reminded me* of Eric Garner's last words in 2014, "I can't breathe."
- *They have reminded me* of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice who was shot in a park gazebo where he was sitting all alone. He had an orange-tipped BB gun. I used to play with a BB gun when I was his age.
- *They have reminded me* of Ahmaud Arbery who was jogging and Breonna Taylor who was sleeping and now George Floyd who made a mistake, and how I've jogged, slept and made mistakes, but I'm still here.¹

- They have *reminded me* that they are sick and dying from Covid-19 at higher rates than other Americans due to poverty and frontline work.

I believe my black brothers and sisters in Christ are *reminding me* of these things because they love me and so I'll repent. It's hard for me to hear a prophet's voice. I don't think I would have heard Stephen if I were sitting in the Sanhedrin that day.

Acts 7:51-53 (NIV) 51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

I see Stephen pointing the finger at me, “You're stiff-necked Jonathan. You haven't helped because you fear man more than you fear God.” God called the Israelites “stiff-necked” in the wilderness (Exod 32:9; 33:3; 34:9). It wasn't a compliment. He called them stiff-necked because they'd rather worship a golden calf than him. They would rather keep doing the old things they felt comfortable doing in Egypt than do the new thing God was doing through Moses, and now through Jesus and Stephen.

I'm comfortable. I don't want to risk anything. I'm tired of being tired. Comfort is my golden calf. I'd rather sacrifice them than do anything that makes me feel at risk. God loved the Israelites enough to send prophets like Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Stephen. He loves me enough to send me Kenneth and Manny, two black pastors asking for help. I want to hear them. *I want to take a posture of listening.*

When I don't listen, it dehumanizes (them and me).

When Stephen charges the Sanhedrin with stiff-necks, killing the prophets, and killing the Righteous One—the Messiah, they refuse to listen, and it dehumanizes them.

Acts 7:54 (NIV) When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.”

They gnash their teeth at Stephen! They become a pack of fanged salivating wolves circling a wounded deer. They become their true selves. I wonder if that's what's hiding inside me, my worst self just waiting to make an appearance. I know that when I don't listen to others, a part of me comes out that I don't want others to see. They rush at Stephen and drag him out of the city like a dog, dehumanizing him.

I've noticed in my own heart that when I'm upset with someone and I stay away from them, the worse they become. But if I go and talk with them, my anger tends to subside. I begin to see their point of view, their side of the story. I'm really good at coming up with reasons why I don't have to listen, but all that does is push me away from them. *When I don't listen, it dehumanizes (them and me).*

If any of you want to discuss with me about where I'm at, come and talk with me. I want to hear your heart. Maybe you're black or work in law-enforcement or know someone whose been hurt in the protests. I want to hear you. You're precious and valuable too. Maybe I'll see something I haven't seen before. I hope I'll see Jesus a little more clearly. Stephen looks up into heaven and has an amazing vision of Jesus.

I want to listen because I want to see Jesus.

Acts 7:55-56 (NIV) But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Stephen’s vision is like Daniel’s vision when he looked up into heaven and saw a figure called the “Son of Man.”

Daniel 7:13-14 (NIV) 13 “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Stephen sees Jesus is standing next to the throne where God has given him all authority, glory, and sovereign power, where all nations and peoples of every language worship him. My brothers and sisters in Christ of color have an amazing vision of Jesus too, one that I can’t see as clearly.

- *They see* how Jesus’ sovereign rule gives all nations and peoples value and worth, black, Asian, white, you name it—we are valuable.
- *They see* how God has given Christ and all Christians a ministry of reconciliation, not just spiritual reconciliation, but social and systemic reconciliation too (2 Cor 5:17-21). Jesus rights all wrongs.
- *They see* how Jesus is the “Son of Man”—God, man, and Messiah, someone who cares deeply for the things of God and the things of man. Who hurts when we hurt.

I want to listen because I want to see Jesus. The Sanhedrin miss seeing Jesus. I want to look up.

Acts 7:57-58a (NIV) 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him...

They drag Stephen out of the city like a lynching mob. *They dehumanize him.* They drown his voice with other things. I don’t want that to be me. I want them to know I value them.

I’m trying to listen because I want others to know their worth.

One of the ways I’m trying to listen is by hearing black speakers and authors tell their story directly. I don’t want to hear what people say they say. I want to hear their voices directly so I tried [Pass The Mic: A Witness Podcast](#) this week. It opened with a clip from a sermon where the pastor said:

People in power have historically diminished the image of God in people of African descent. Based on someone’s skin color they were deemed less human, less worthy of dignity. But the doctrine of the image of God teaches us that pigment does not determine personhood.

Right now my brothers and sisters of color are telling me they feel dehumanized. No human being, no matter what they’ve done, should ever feel this way because of the “Imago Dei”—the image of God.

Genesis 1:27 (NIV)

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

If I am made in the image of God, I'm made for special relationship with him. My son looks like me. He's made for special relationship with me. I want to show I know black people they're made in God's image by simply listening to them and hopefully showing their worth. I listened to two panels this week:

1. Let's Talk: Racial Justice and the Church with Sam Kim, Kenneth Youth, and Bobby Warrenburg

This one had so much great stuff in it. It really helped to see some other white pastors struggling with what to do but expressing that this is right. Now is the time. There were two white pastors, one black pastor, and one Korean pastor.

2. Racism & The Church with Manny Daphnis, Marc Lavarin, and Tim Bresnahan.

I spent two years with Manny and Tim in the Ockenga Fellows Program. They were helpful too. These are ways I'm trying to take a posture of listening. On Friday night Monica and I watched the movie Just Mercy, which is free for the month of June. It's based on Bryan Stevenson's memoir about his founding of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) and his fight for justice for death row inmates. I read the book a couple years ago and it shook me. It started me down this path of hearing people of color's hurt.

I just watched the first episode of a video study called The Color of Compromise by Jemar Tisby. He talks about how the American church has actually reinforced racism and inequality by our silent complicity and what we can do about it. I'd love to have someone to watch and discuss these 20-minute videos with me. We could process together.

As the Elders and I are processing we sent out a sermon on "The Gospel and Social Justice" (0:43) by Pastor Tom Sparling. I sensed the Holy Spirit speaking to me in that sermon. He recommends three books: 1) The Myth of Equality by Ken Wytsma, One Blood by John M. Perkins, or Woke Church by Eric Mason. I've read One Blood and would love to have a reading partner or two to read and discuss the others.

I ran across one initiative called Justice in June inviting people to become an active ally to the black community by spending 10, 25, or 45 minutes a day learning about the cause. I'm trying to spend a little time a couple days a week listening. I found a second Anti-racism resource for white people and parents. I've included links to both in my sermon manuscript if it could help anyone else listen (this is not an endorsement of their content or political movements; please review thoughtfully and Biblically).

On Wednesday I attended the Westford for Black Lives Matter rally on the Westford Common. Over 300 people attended. A lot of them had signs, and the speakers were really touching. One young black woman talked about how she had been called the "n-word" on her school bus and by her classmates. She said she appreciated how the teachers had responded so well. She talked about how grateful she was for the Westford police department and how a Westford officer had actually invited her to the rally. Another woman talked about how she was afraid the momentum would stop but she was hopeful. As I was standing there I'll confess I felt uncomfortable. It wasn't normal to me to attend an event like that, but I'm glad I went and I believe Jesus wants me to go again. *I want to take a posture of listening.*

I want to be better at talking to my African American friends and friends of other ethnicities. I want to ask questions like, "How are you doing?" "Have you ever experienced racism?" Or "What is it like being black or asian and living here?" So far, even when I've stumbled around, those I'm asking have appreciated the questions. *I'm trying to listen because I want others to know their worth.*

I'm hopeful that listening will help me see my sin and repent.

As I was thinking about Stephen's sermon and how the Sanhedrin responded I was reminded of a different sermon. When Peter preached to the crowd at Pentecost, like Stephen he told them that Jesus is Messiah and Lord, God himself.

Acts 2:36 (NIV) "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

But they responded completely differently.

Acts 2:37 (NIV) When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

The crowds listen, and it leads to life. They hear, they recognize their sins, and they confess, which is a little confusing because at least some of them probably weren't there when Jesus died. Maybe some of them were in the crowd and shouted "crucify him!" but many of them were probably absent, yet still they're convicted of their sin and guilt. The Jewish people understood corporate guilt. I think of individual sin way more than shared sin. But one of the panelists reminded me that I also share Adam's sin.² That means I'm guilty of all Adam's sins. Whether or not I am guilty of racist acts, I am guilty of racist sin before God because I was born in Adam (Rom 5:19). As I'm listening and growing in my understanding of systemic racism, I'm beginning to realize my own sins. *I'm hopeful that listening will help me see my sin and repent.* It's through repentance that I pass from death to life, from the old Adam to the new. I'm forgiven in the new Adam, Christ Jesus.

I'm forgiven in Christ.

Here's how Stephen goes to his cross.

Acts 7:58b-8:1a (NIV) ...Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. 8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him.

As Stephen is crushed to death under the weight of rocks, Stephen prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" just like Jesus prays on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." I wonder if my black brothers and sisters in Christ have been praying this for me, "Father, forgive him. He doesn't know what he is doing."

Saul was there, approving of the killing. Jesus appeared to Saul and he repented of his sins and believed in Jesus (Acts 8:3; 26:15-18). He became Paul, the great evangelist for the grace of God—that whoever repents of their sins and believes in Jesus will be saved. Paul was transferred from the old Adam to the new, no longer guilty of racist sin, forgiven.

In Acts 22:20 Paul specifically recalls the blood of Stephen. I wonder if Paul heard Stephen praying and God used that to soften his heart. My prayer is that George Floyd's blood would soften my heart. That his death would lead to a greater awareness of my own sin and dependency on Jesus for grace and forgiveness. Jesus was there with Stephen. He is there with all who suffer.

I want to take a posture of listening.

I want to hear the Stephens of my day. I want to ask good questions. I want to amplify their voices. I want to be their ally. I can take a *posture of listening*, even if I hear things that hurt me or make me feel

uncomfortable, because Jesus loved me enough to die for my sins. His love and kindness towards me gives me the strength to look at myself honestly. I don't need to be defensive because my Heavenly Father calls me his child (John 1:12). But he's also helping me recognize his other children are hurting, my black brothers and sisters in Christ. I want to hear them. *I want to take a posture of listening.*

Romans 15:13 (NIV) May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

*Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#).
Read the [story of our church here](#).*

Discussion Questions

1. How do you feel about everything going on in our culture right now?
2. Who are you hurting?
3. What do you sense Jesus is telling you?
4. How can you love and care for others?
5. How can we pray for you? Please email: prayer@cornerstonewestford.com

*This sermon document updated November 11th, 2020 to clarify sharing some links does not constitute an endorsement.

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¹ “Black Americans account for less than 13 percent of the population but they are shot and killed by the police at a rate that's over twice as high as for white Americans.”

² Thanks Sam Kim for making this point in the panel. <https://nscbc.org/2020/05/29/three-takeaways-from-lets-talk-racial-justice-and-the-church/?fbclid=IwAR2I1zfLbTol9r-MggAiNC5pe6CJKknffxgEQXTOzkd8W7gK3ifkNE4Fbgg>