

**May 2, 2021**  
**The Way I Choose To React Is ...**  
**Acts 6:1-15, 7:54-59**

Has it ever struck you how people – compared to other creatures – are capable of acts of incredible beauty, compassion, mercy, and grace ... ? You don't see elephants creating sculptures. You don't see sharks helping an injured comrade. Maybe this is something of that "image of God" within us ...

Has it ever also struck you how people – compared to other creatures – are capable of incredible cruelty, gratuitous violence, hatred, and outright evil. A white-tailed deer doesn't discriminate against the mule deer because it has different coloured fur. The nuthatch in my backyard doesn't spread lies or conspiracy theories about the chickadee.

What is it about (fallen) human nature that we can be "*like an angel*" (Acts 6:15) one moment and be "*furious, gnashing our teeth*" (Acts 7:54) the next? I know I'm a bit schizophrenic like this. I can have moments when I do what is right, but others when I lose my temper, blow it, and do what is very wrong.

Our challenge, this morning, is to think about how we react in challenging situations.

***Facing real challenges***

After Jesus' resurrection, His followers are talking about Jesus. Many people are coming to faith. The church is growing. The church is also facing challenges: one challenge is very practical: how to deal with all the new ministry needs they have. A controversy erupts between Greek-speaking Jewish widows and Hebrew-speaking Jewish widows about who is receiving more food from the church. The apostles, trying to focus on sharing the good news about Jesus, are being dragged into the squabble. They appoint seven "deacons/servants" to administer the food bank, including a fellow named Stephen ("*a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit*" (6:5)).

Another challenge is much more serious and sinister: they are facing real, brutal persecution from the Jewish authorities. This is an incredibly polarized world where people are literally killing other people because of their religious and political beliefs.

In this intense pressure cooker, Stephen is further described as "*a man full of God's grace and power,*" who "*performed amazing miracles and signs among the people*" (6:8). When people argue with Stephen, he answers calmly, rationally, peacefully, and in a godly way (6:10). Further, when Stephen is in front of the Sanhedrin, "*Everyone stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's*" (6:15).

Unfortunately, Stephen's calmness, faithfulness, wisdom, peace, and grace only seem to infuriate the powers-that-be.

In fairness, the Jewish leaders are also in a challenging situation. They feel their religion and identity are under attack. They have presided over the execution of this would-be Messiah, Jesus. Now His followers are claiming He has risen from the dead. The priests and teachers of the law cannot disprove their claims. Jesus' body is gone. Dozens of credible witnesses are corroborating the events of Easter and beyond. They followers of Jesus are speaking in all sorts of foreign languages (Acts 2), healing people (Acts 3, 5), and preaching fearlessly and powerfully. Thousands of people are following Peter, John and the other ringleaders of this new Jesus-movement. The Jewish leaders' worldview is being turned upside-down. What are they going to do?

Far from being full of faith, the Holy Spirit, or God's grace and power, the Jewish leaders *"stirred up the people ... seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin ... and produced false witnesses"* who testified against him (6:12-13).

After Stephen explains his convictions, *"The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage ... they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him"*(7:54-58). Notice the footnote: *"His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named **Saul**"*(7:58).

Let's return to **Stephen** for a moment. He is being falsely accused. He is being unfairly tried. He is about to be stoned (which is illegal under Roman law – only Roman authorities can pass or carry out the death sentence). How does Stephen react? Is he protesting his innocence? Claiming his "rights"? Calling down the wrath of God upon his persecutors? *"As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' He fell to his knees, shouting, 'Lord, don't charge them with this sin!' And with that, he died"*(7:59-60). Who does that remind you of? Remember what Jesus said from the cross, *"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing"*(Luke 23:34).

As Stephen dies a hideous death, Luke notes that, *"**Saul** was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria ... **Saul** was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison"*(8:1-3). *"**Saul** was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them, both men and women, back to Jerusalem in chains"*(9:1-2).

Both Stephen and the Jewish leaders/Saul face real challenges. But they handle the threats against them in VERY different ways. **Stephen**, filled with the Spirit, responds with grace. The **priests/Saul** respond with anger, hatred, lies, and violence.

## ***What about us?***

Are we facing challenges on May 2, 2021? Just a few! Like the followers of Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, we live in a polarized world; polarized politically, polarized culturally, and polarized religiously (between and WITHIN faiths, WITHIN churches).

How do we, as the people of God, handle that? A few weeks ago (April 11), Darrell Johnson reminded us Jesus prayed that we might be one just as He and the Father are one (John 17:21, 22). That we, as people "in Christ" – as people who name the name of Jesus and seek to follow Him – might "*be brought to complete unity*" (17:23). I hope we can agree that following the model of the religious leaders and Saul – shaking our fists in rage, putting our hands over our ears, shouting, and stoning people (even just metaphorically) – is NOT the way to be "one" or "in complete unity."

- They argued (6:9) – in the name of God.
- They stirred up conspiracy theories and lied (6:11-14) – in the name of God.
- They lost their tempers (7:54) – in the name of God.
- They lashed out (7:57-58) – in their case VERY violently – in the name of God.
- Saul went on a witch hunt, determined to destroy those he saw as his enemies (8:1-3, 9:1-3). He couldn't let go. After all, he was on a mission from God.

When we face our challenges, do we

- Argue – even in the name of God?
- Get into conspiracy theories and blatantly lie – even in the name of God?
- Lose our tempers – even in the name of God?
- Lash out – even in the name of God?
- Go on a witch hunt, determined to destroy those we see as enemies (people who think differently, or have different beliefs than us) – even in the name of God?

How did this work out for Saul? Was he able to destroy the work of the Holy Spirit? Not at all. In fact, the church grew as Jesus' people scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Did it work for Saul, personally? No! Saul is not a content, satisfied man. For all his zeal, he is a pathetic, tragic figure.

Then, we read, Jesus appears to Saul. Saul is literally bowled over by Jesus (Acts 9:1-5). Now Saul, himself, is "filled with the Holy Spirit" – just like Stephen (Acts 9:17). Everyone notices a complete change in Saul/Paul's personality: "*Immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'Jesus is indeed the Son of God!' All who heard him were amazed*" (Acts 9:20-21).

The Jewish leaders now conspire to kill him (Acts 9:23). Does Saul argue or fight back with shaking fists, shouting, or stones? He can see the writing on the wall in Damascus but, instead of lashing out or violent confrontation – as was his old nature – he gets out

of town. Like Stephen, this “Holy-Spirit-filled” Saul chooses to follow the pattern of Jesus. When people tried to kill Jesus, He had a remarkable way of just disappearing among the crowds – diffusing explosive situations. So did Saul.

Is Stephen’s behaviour weakness? Is Spirit-filled-Saul’s choice not to argue, fight, and hurl stones weakness? Our homes – communities – and churches – become shaped by how we act and react. If we act with anger, outrage, and violence, we create a culture of anger, outrage, and violence; our homes/churches become angry, bitter, unhappy places. If we act with grace, forgiveness, love, a sense of humour, our homes/churches become places of grace, forgiveness, love, and a sense of humour. Which takes greater strength: to throw stones, or to stand for what is right with grace and love?

True strength exhibits itself in uncompromising commitment to what you really believe AND in self-control, forgiveness, grace, and love even when your commitments are different from the culture or people around you. Just like Jesus. That’s very difficult. But it creates a culture of self-control, forgiveness, grace, and love that’s contagious.

### ***What’s the key?***

The key is the little phrase “*filled with the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 6:5, 7:55, 9:17). If I am filled with God’s Spirit, I am allowing Him to shape my beliefs, values, emotions, and actions. My actions and reactions will be in line with Jesus. Among other things, that means I DON’T shake my fists in rage, put my hands over my ears, shout, or lob stones at people (literally or metaphorically). I don’t attack people (Christians or others).

In line with Jesus, I DO consciously pray always, asking Him to help me to be the person I ought to be (1 Thessalonians 5:17). I ask the Spirit for wisdom to handle life’s challenges. With grace. With mercy. With the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). That doesn’t come naturally to me. But when I do choose to prayerfully listen to and obey the Spirit, my home becomes the home of love and peace it ought to be. My relationships are characterized by love, forgiveness, and mercy, as they ought to be. My church will be the church of love, grace, and life it ought to be.

One person asked about our church people: “Can people actually be that nice?” The response from someone who has a loose connection to our church, replied, “Oh yeah they can. You should meet some of the church people. They actually are that nice.”

The question is: am I choosing the way of **Saul/religious leaders** – the way of anger, outrage, and violence? Or am I choosing the way of **Jesus**? The way of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?