

Monday, April 19, 2021

"Filled with Grace and Power ..."

Texts: Acts 6:8-15; John 6:22-29

Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

Stephen and Jesus – we have two stories to consider today. The Luke-Acts writer gives us a post-Resurrection narrative about Stephen, while the Johannine writer presents us with a pre-Resurrection narrative about Jesus. Both are very dramatic events and so we are led to ask this morning: What, if any, connections are there between these two scenes and especially for us who are still celebrating Easter?

The Gospels of course *are* about Jesus, the Jewish man who is deeply situated within his Jewish tradition but who also wants to correct some of its rigid teachings and take it to new horizons. The Acts, by contrast, are about *the effects* of this preaching, teaching and healing of Jesus on his post-Resurrection followers, who listen, are converted and committed now to forming new Jesus-centered assemblies, the beginnings of the Church, *ekklesia*, still Jerusalem-based and thus in its earliest stages.

Stephen is described as "filled with grace and power." The Greek words for grace and power are *caritas* and *dunamis* and *dunamis* in the New Testament means not authority given through public office but the power of God in us. Stephen inhabits Jesus deeply and even possesses God's gifts for "working signs and wonders among the people." He has just been appointed a deacon to care for the widows and their children, people despised by the establishment and who are reduced to begging for their bread. He is also a very well-educated Hellenistic Jew who knows Hebrew and Greek and who can proclaim *skillfully* the message of Jesus in both cultural milieux. Even the Sanhedrin are impressed by him, so much so that they look *intently* at him, which I think means that they are trying to figure him out, and what they see is that "his face was like an angel."

Stephen labors in tough times with certain Jerusalem synagogues differing in their understanding of the Temple and Mosaic law, their adherents being genuinely confused about this new proclamation of Stephen who asks them to embrace Jesus as the new Moses and to loosen up on some of the laws. We already know the rest of the story regarding Stephen (tomorrow's reading), that he is stoned to death by the crowd, including the yet unconverted Paul. In fact, Stephen utters in his last breath the same words that Jesus did dying, no doubt the *dunamis* gracing him fully.

In our pre-Resurrection Johannine reading this morning, we see Jesus withdrawing after feeding the thousands with five loaves of bread and a couple of dried fish. He needs, it seems, to regain his center contemplatively since the people want to make him a king. But then he comes back on his own to his disciples and the people, geared up again to lead them into the deeper meaning of bread, which is not only for physical sustenance but also for the long haul of life – the Living Bread – inhabiting God consciously, having deep faith in God, who is *always* with us to give us strength and courage and even, like

Stephen, a *fullness of grace and power* to work with others for an ever-wider interpretation of tradition and laws toward fuller inclusion.

We too are in tough times today. There is division in our civil order, stridently so in the horrific gap between the rich and the poor, so many of whom struggle to have even the physical daily bread, let alone the Living Bread for the long haul of life. There is also division in our Church about interpreting certain teachings. Who gets to receive the Eucharist, for instance – the Bread of Life – and even when they are fully faithful members of our Church? Or how most of us in our country and in our Church are implicated in white privilege. Just because our skin is white, we have such freedom of movement and have access to so much! As such, we in fact contribute to creating structural racism.

Stephen had indeed fully absorbed the proclamation of the Johannine Jesus and turned himself over to the *caritas* and *dynamis*, *the grace and power of God*. He was also well informed about the cultural issues of his time, viewing them critically from the Jesus proclamation. I think we need both dimensions today: to be very well informed and also to take a stand from *living fully in the grace and power of God* on our white privilege and also on our narrow pre-scientific interpretations of some laws. May we be so blessed and aware and engaged in our times now!!