



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday December 31st, 2017 - Christmas I

“Stephen, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Like a number of people in our church, I was a “cradle Catholic.” I was born to a Roman Catholic mother and a Methodist father, and was baptized in the Catholic church shortly thereafter. And I endured all of the things that young and adolescent Catholics do, such as CCD classes, ill-tempered nuns, and the like. And, being a green-haired teen with an earring in his nose who enjoyed being provocative, I also started getting strange looks and odd shunnings from the small but growing parish in our farm town. And, feeling disconnected from the church, I bailed; and I explored every sort of religion and irreligion I could find. None of them especially served me, I might add.

When I wanted to explore the church again, I eventually wound up at a local evangelical church. And while I still had the earring in my nose (though the hair had exited stage left), I found the people to be free of judgment; but the experience in general still felt quite anonymous, and the style of worship was entirely foreign to me.

So when I darkened the doorstep of St. Stephen's a few months later, it was like hitting paydirt. The worship was what I was used to, and the people....my goodness, the people were warm and engaging and

really seemed to function as a family. And I decided after only a couple services that I'd stop looking for a church home and remain here until somebody wised up and asked me to leave.

Now at the time, I didn't know who St. Stephen was, but I learned in short time, and in doing so began to appreciate why our church was named after him. We like to think all churches are special, and I'm sure to a large degree, they all are. But in endeavoring to live up to our namesake, the people of St. Stephen's are really just endeavoring to live up to the life and edicts of Jesus Himself.

We first learn of Saint Stephen in Acts of the Apostles. He was one of seven deacons appointed by the Apostles, and his job was to distribute food and charitable aid to poorer members of the community in the early church. Does this sound like a local place you visit once a week or more? We may have a reasonably full house most Sundays, but the amount of souls we bless and heal through our pastoral care outreach and our ministry to the homeless and mentally ill of Baltimore actually eclipses the number of folks who show up for Holy Communion here. Saint Stephen's church isn't just a team of people who talk about Christianity, we're immersed

in it. That's why healers and ministers and empaths are drawn to this place; they wound up here for a reason.

But as much as Stephen's duties as a Deacon in the early church earn him the right to have countless churches named after him, the way he died, and the profound faith he displayed in his death, cement the deal; he was, as you surely know, the first martyr of the Christian church. Stephen knew that to be a Christian, one had to actually *act* like Christ - to *love* like Christ - to *forgive* like Christ, and to *die* like Christ.

True love requires true forgiveness, even if the forgiveness is not asked for, because to forgive somebody who didn't ask for it IS an act of sacrifice. We are sacrificing what is justly ours - our anger, to give them the gift of peace, absolution. The fact is, we misunderstand how forgiveness works; we often think that forgiveness begins on the lips or in the heart of the offender, when it actually begins in the heart of the offended. Just as forgiveness *begins and is ended* in the heart of Christ, not in our minds or on our lips.

Being a Christian means having the faith of Stephen, that even as we are beset with the worst of the worst, or merely (assuming we're not being stoned to death) what may appear as the worst of the worst, that we have faith that there is peace and restoration at the end.

The words of Stephen echoed the words of Christ because the faith of Stephen echoed the faith of Christ. The surety that Christ had that the Father would welcome His spirit home, and the surety Christ had that the Father would hear His plea that the sins of His crucifiers be not laid on them is echoed in Stephen's surety that his soul would be received by his Father in Heaven, and likewise that his prayer on behalf of his murderers would be heard and be as effectual as any intercessory prayer ever uttered.

To live as a Christian is to live with the simple, sure faith of Saint Stephen. He prayed for those who persecuted him, and trusted that God would hear his prayer, and that God would restore him and make him perfect in the end. To live as a Christian means to understand that our current struggles, be they

emotional pain, addiction, or physical frailty, may not be made whole in this life, but that God will bless them and perfect them, and us, in the end.

You may be thinking "Fr. Michael, that all sounds well and good. But Stephen had a beatific vision of Christ, obviously he was comforted. But it's been a banner year for pain in my household, and even though I'm a faithful Christian, I still sometimes wonder if God is on break." But the truth is, the overwhelming majority of us don't get beatific visions. Often, being Christian means allowing ourselves to see God's glory shining in through the cracks. The surprise phone call from an old friend, the comforting memory that invades our mind when we least expect it, a gift from a stranger whose only goal was to bring joy to somebody else's life. We beg God for signs and wonders, but miss them when they show up. To open our hearts and our eyes to the gentle, ever-presence of God in our lives, filling in the cracks and making our brokenness perfect is to live the simple, sure faith of Stephen.

The Japanese actually have a 500 year old art form that illustrates this perfectly, called "kintsugi." When a piece of pottery or the like crashes to the floor, craftsmen restore it with a lacquer that is mixed with gold, silver, or platinum. This is interwoven with the philosophy of wabi-sabi, which means "to find the beauty in broken things." In the end, the final product is made *more beautiful* and realizes its full potential after it's been broken and restored, and the true beauty of it is seen in the gold that fills in the cracks.

And when we put aside our anxiety and our worry and our existential grief and allow that to shine in our own lives, we live out the simple, trusting faith of our namesake, blessed Saint Stephen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.