

## The Shape of Love: You Shall Not Murder

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

March 16, 2025 AM Sermon

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Acts 6:8-15; 7:51-8:1

We continue in our series this week, The Shape of Love, with the sixth commandment. Exodus 20:13 says, "You shall not murder." It's literally two verses in Hebrew, but this little, tiny command has an outsized reach over a whole realm of human life and behavior. So today I wanted to refract this command through another Scripture passage. Although there are many other illegal and immoral killings in the Bible, the story of Stephen in Acts gives us some clues about what happens in the heart to turn religious people into an angry mob that can justify taking a life.

As we read this story of the first Christian martyrdom, I have a question. Why is Stephen killed? You might say that he's killed because of his testimony about Jesus. And you would be right. But on a human level, why is Stephen killed?

Let's look at the way the responses to him unfold. Chapter 6:8 says Stephen is "full of God's grace and power" and "performed great wonders and signs among the people." As Stephen's ministry takes off, he starts attracting attention. And with attention comes opposition. Other Jews from around the Mediterranean rim start debating with Stephen. But they can't refute him because the Holy Spirit is at work in his words. So those who oppose Stephen change methods from open-forum debate to backroom whispers. The rumor mill begins to churn, outright falsehoods spread.

"You know that new deacon, Stephen? We've heard him saying Moses wasn't such a big deal, that maybe he wasn't even really a prophet," one man says. "I heard that too," another agrees. "Don't get me started on what he's saying about God. It's absolutely blasphemous." Word on the street travels fast. Stephen starts noticing the looks; fields some of the questions. But he keeps on keeping on. Through every level of the synagogue community - congregants, elders, ruling council members - suspicion about him rises.

The day comes when Stephen is taken into custody. He's seized and brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council and the same 70-member body that tried Jesus. The High Priest asks Stephen to answer the charges against him. Stephen's defense, which we didn't read, makes up the longest speech in the book of Acts. He condenses and interprets the long history of the people of Israel and signals his shared convictions with his hearers, until he just can't anymore. Because those who have resisted the prophets have now resisted God's Son. "You stiff-necked people! You are just like your ancestors! You always resist the Holy Spirit!" The accused accuses his accusers. They've rejected God's Messiah and Stephen is there to warn them. You can hear the rage in the courtyard. Gnashing teeth. Growling voices. Shouts and yells as the crowd rushes Stephen, runs him out of town, and picks up stones to kill him.

Is Stephen's death a mob murder, or a capital punishment for blasphemy? It seems like a mob murder. He doesn't finish his defense, and there's no sentence pronounced by the Sanhedrin, which doesn't have the authority to execute anyone anyway; that's why Jesus was handed over to Pilate as a Roman leader. So, it seems that Stephen's death comes about not as the result of blind justice in the court of the Jews, but at the hands of an offended audience in a violent uprising. You might say that in the case of Stephen, the killing began long before the moment of the stoning. It began in the seeds of envy in those who couldn't refute his reasoning, who saw something godly in him and wondered about their own place in the community. It grew through the cracks of whispered half-truths and murmured falsehoods. And it came to full bloom when a primed and enraged crowd executed judgment.

So why did Stephen die? Because he preached Jesus? Well, yes. But that's not saying quite enough. He died because his message pointed to something powerful not only in heaven but also on earth, something that threatened the authority and position of the Jewish religious establishment. Stephen's message about Jesus had the potential to reshape the structure and order that was. The message is just a little too hot to handle. It

must be stamped out. And so, persecution starts that day, not just against Stephen but against all who, like him, follow Jesus.

My guess is that only a few of us listening to this passage today could personally identify with having taken the life of another person. Maybe none of us have participated in a violent mob. Maybe you heard this was the commandment for the week and felt relieved that this one wasn't immediately relatable for you. And, by the way, if you have taken a life and are listening, we are thankful that you're here seeking Jesus too.

But if we're honest, most of us can relate to the welling up of murderous rage that we see from the crowd in Stephen's story. My kids can tell you that this week when the dog jumped up and ate our daughter's breakfast as we were running late again, I was about ready to hit the ceiling. We know what it feels like to have death-dealing anger flood over us. The bad news for us, then, is that Jesus has some pointed words not just related to actually taking someone's life. Jesus tells us we better pay attention to the heart-and-mindset that leads us in that direction.

In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says 5:21-22 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Jesus raises the standard of the commandment much higher than simply refraining from killing someone. He calls out matters of the heart and mind. And although he seems to condemn anger outright, this must mean something different than righteous anger or its expression, which Jesus himself demonstrated sometimes (Mark 3: 5). But Jesus does tell us to watch out with our anger. We shouldn't seethe in hate and hostility. We can't use our words to insult, bully, or abuse those around us. We must not kill other people's spirits. When we do that, something in us dies too.

The Heidelberg Catechism sums up the sixth commandment to say that "I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—and I am not to be a party to this in others; rather I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either." Instead, the Catechism goes on to say, "God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies."

This morning let's name here before God a temptation we all face: the temptation not to do good to our enemies, but rather to dehumanize them. Those people on the other side of whatever conflict we're in. It's oh-so-tempting to exaggerate their flaws and failures; easy to rejoice in their weakness; to call them names and ultimately to wish for their end. We must guard our hearts against this path, friends loved by Jesus. If our social media feed causes us to be "party to belittling others," let's cut it off and throw it away. If the news we're watching makes it too easy to hate our neighbors who see things differently, let's turn it off. If stewing in a memory of past insults only increases our desire for revenge, let's name that with someone we trust and take steps toward being free of that.

I'm not suggesting we put our heads in the sand and pretend all is well when it isn't. We shouldn't whitewash over truly harmful actions or bless misguided ideas. That's certainly not Stephen's approach in his speech, and it's not Jesus' approach either. We can and must cry out to God when things are wrong, even evil. We can speak up against efforts that harm those who need protection. We can act firmly and wisely together and as individuals toward what is good as God shows us the way. But as we do so we must be people of life, not death. We must pray, live, and act in the bright lights of our shared humanity. We remember that all people are persons, image bearers of God, despite the warped and tarnished reflection they bear. Grace in the World: Recognizing our shared humanity and need for forgiveness.

This week I was reminded of the story of Adolf Eichmann. Eichman was the officer in charge of deporting Jews from Nazi-occupied territory leading up to World War II, and later a critical player in the state-sponsored plan to murder millions of Jewish people. After the war ended, Eichmann managed to escape Germany and live under an assumed name in Argentina before being arrested and tried in the 1960s. During the trial the world heard not only the documented evidence against Eichmann but also the victim impact

statements of survivors. Their firsthand accounts of starvation, abuse, humiliation, and death helped the world see what we know as the Holocaust.

Forty years ago now, a segment of *60 Minutes* documented Eichmann's story. Mike Wallace, the host of the show, asked his viewers, "How is it possible for a man to act as Eichmann acted? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying? Was he normal?" Wallace followed this question with an interview with Yehiel Dinur. Dinur was a writer and Auschwitz survivor who had testified against Eichmann at his trial. When Dinur faced Eichmann behind the bulletproof glass cube he occupied in the courtroom on June of 1961, Dinur began to sob, becoming so distressed that he collapsed. It was later determined that he'd had a stroke. Was Dinur reliving his concentration camp experiences in that moment? Remembering the terror and feeling extreme hatred toward this man who had done so much harm? Not exactly. Dinur explained his response to Wallace as one of fear. He saw in the face of this man who had done so much harm the face of a human like him. "I was afraid about myself;" Dinur said. "I saw that I am capable of doing this. I am...exactly like he [is]." Grace in the Text: Stephen's looking an awful lot like Jesus.

When we begin to see in our own souls the capacity for deadly anger, we can turn toward one another with greater mercy. We see in the other people the shared, sacred, God-given gift of our humanity; all of us humans whose capacities for love and trust and obedience have been bent by the fall.

Martin Luther King Junior said that each of us may at some point have the power to pounce on a person who has dealt us death blows in life: "There will come a time... when the person who hates you most, the person who has misused you most, the person who has gossiped about you most, the person who has spread false rumors about you most, there will come a time when you will have an opportunity to defeat that person.... That's the time you must not do it. That is the meaning of love..... Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all men. It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system you love...."

Jesus, the perfect image of the invisible God, came to restore the image of God in humanity. He came into the broken ecosystem of our world, into the dark corners of our hearts. He did it not to overpower and defeat us, but to defeat the power of sin and death over us. Instead of calling down well-deserved punishment on those who wanted him dead, he went to the cross to carry their sin away. The power of this love transforms people. Depending on how exactly you count, there are at least eight parallels between the way Stephen dies and the way his Lord dies. You can see glimpses of the life of Jesus in Stephen, can't you? At the end, both cry out to God to receive their spirits. And with their dying breaths, both ask for the forgiveness of those murdering them. At this moment of deep suffering, Stephen bears an uncanny resemblance to his Lord. In the story of Stephen's lynching, who is standing with the coats? Who is looking on in zealous satisfaction at the first Christian martyr? Saul. Yes. And I wonder. I wonder if Stephen could have imagined the Holy-Spirit groundwork that was being laid that day. Perhaps in part as an answer to Stephen's last prayer, Saul the participant in a mob murder will become a missionary. And in God's eternal justice and wisdom, both the murderer and the murdered are part of the cloud of witnesses for which the church all over the world thanks God. Only the good news of Jesus makes such a thing as this possible. Only the good news of Jesus makes us people of strong love and hopeful peace as we live in a world that God is slowly and relentlessly making new.

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