

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Matt Vandagriff
Acts 7:55-60
April 20, 2008

VAV Letter #1: Where the Path Will Lead...

Few of you probably know this about me, but I had the opportunity in college to be part of an archaeological dig. We went to Turkey for about 10 days during May and I dug up dirt and brushed off little pieces of rock, all for college credit. We went to Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Hierapolis or Pammukale. We went to Colossae, which is a pile of unexcavated dirt with a sign near it. It was a great deal of fun. While I was there, I encountered a group of writings that are soon to be published, through a museum curator. They are biographies of lesser-known biblical characters. The title of these writings was the VAV letters, the Vandagriff Authorized Versions and we happen to have a copy of one about Stephen this morning.

Stephen was a young Hellenistic Jew who knew God as the God of Israel. He did not live in Jerusalem, but in the town of Dan. Early in Stephen's life he spent his time learning the basics. He went to the synagogue and would learn from the synagogue leaders. He was Hellenistic, adopting the Greek culture and language, but continuing to follow the Torah as best he could. Stephen also learned from the Pharisees who taught him to obey the law, know the law, and keep from transgressing it. He defined success in terms of "not" doing things. He did not eat meat on the prescribed days. He spent his mornings in prayer. He rose from bed saying the Shema, "Hear, O Israel" and went to bed saying the same. He had a clearly defined set of rules to follow and would argue with anyone who disagreed. He took himself very seriously, because his righteousness depended upon such. He was a self-made good person with well-defined boundaries and rules. He understood exactly what it meant to be right and wrong. He knew how to live faithfully with God. He spent his days dwelling in this world, where he learned the restrictions and kept everything in its proper place. He ate the right foods, said the right prayers, made sure his phylacteries were always straight, and his clothing neatly pressed. He was the epitome of self-control, and life made sense.

After his years at home, Stephen left to attend the University for Hellenistic Jews (a lesser-known University in the Hellenistic World). Being away from his home, he wanted to attend the synagogue less, as kids will often do. He started to put aside some of his regimented ways. He ate non-kosher meals; it began only once a month but became a once or twice a week habit. He occasionally forgot to say the Shema before going to bed and before rising. He started to leave his phylacteries at home and his clothing became ruffled; he always wanted to wear shorts and flip-flops. His life began to take on more of a grey area as opposed to the black and white world of home. His well-defined boundaries began to dissipate. He began staying out later, meeting people from different paths who had really good things to say.

Stephen began reading from the other parts of his canon as well; he had previously stayed within the Torah. He was spending a lot of time reading from the prophetic books and as he read there, feelings and emotions stirred deep within him. He began to understand the Temple as being flawed, controlled by what he considered an illegitimate hierarchy. He began to see the world in a

more holistic manner that God was calling God's people and they were to follow, much like Abraham. God was not restricted to Israel or specifically to the people of Israel. Stephen wanted to follow wherever God would lead. God's people were not to put down their stake and settle, but instead were meant to populate and infect the world. God was a God of justice. Stephen spoke with fire in his eyes as he called people to repentance, asking them to renounce their ways. He travelled all over the countryside preaching this message after he graduated and along the way he heard other preachers.

He heard about this one preacher in particular who had been travelling around Galilee, preaching repentance of sin and good news to the poor. Supposedly he spoke as one with authority, but Stephen was not convinced. Stephen wanted to meet this person, but was not sure an opportunity would present itself.

One day as Stephen was walking down a road he saw a large crowd gathered in the distance. He began pressing his way through the crowd with the smell of people who had been standing around a long time in the blazing sun. He heard the words "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Those words struck Stephen and he pressed forward through the crowd to catch a glimpse of this man.

Stephen knew from somewhere deep within that what this man said was true. It made sense, it aligned with the Torah and the Prophets, but at the same time it pushed beyond them. He heard this man say, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." Slowly Stephen began to see. He began to understand God as love and forgiveness, grace and mercy. Stephen began to follow this man, but always at a distance. He would hang behind the crowd and observe. He noticed that this man would teach or preach to the crowds and then draw away for times of silence and prayer. Instead of always preaching, this man took time to recharge.

Stephen followed him for about a year simply watching. He tried to practice this habit of pulling away from the crowds at times. He would go off by himself and sit, not sure what to do next. Sometimes he would sit there and just fall asleep, relaxed. He began to pray, but would often rest in silence. This silence began to help him see himself differently. He began to see other people differently.

As the year went by, Stephen longed to be part of Jesus' inner circle, but that was set-aside for only twelve chosen ones. Nevertheless, he spent his time absorbing and learning. He was there in Jerusalem when this man he followed was crucified. He even heard this man's words on the cross, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they do." He heard those words and wondered how someone could undergo such pain and agony, but continue to love.

When Jesus died, Stephen did not know what to do. He tried to hang around with the chosen twelve, well eleven now, and they welcomed him. When Jesus was resurrected and the disciples celebrated, Stephen was there with them on the fringes, longing to be chosen. When the

disciples were casting lots to decide who would replace Judas, Stephen hoped to be the one, but Matthias was the one on whom the lot fell. Oh how Stephen wanted to be a part of them, the chosen. Nevertheless, he continued to withdraw to pray and sit with God as he had seen Jesus do so many times.

As Stephen spent time away from the crowds praying he learned the all-important realization that transformation, becoming a holy person, is always done to us. It is never an act of our own will. We are taught from a young age that if you just try hard enough you can do anything. You can pass the test or earn the promotion, but that is not the path of transformation. We forget that transformation is always done by God. What we do is try to get out of the way. Stephen found this to be true. We try to open ourselves to the God that is already moving, already loving, already transforming. We usually only notice the transformation in small steps, but most of the time other people begin to notice the transformation taking place within us.

Stephen's reputation among the disciples began to grow, unbeknownst to him. They even added a tag line to his name, "the one full of faith and the Holy Spirit." Different people would talk to him, because they knew he was a person who would listen. There was a sense among the people that he was one who knew Jesus without having been on the inner circle. When the controversy arose about the portions of bread to be given to the widows, it only made sense to include Stephen. He was to distribute the food to the widows. He had finally been chosen and set apart, yet this was not the job he preferred. Nevertheless, as he served these women who were alone, it was as if he was serving something greater.

Stephen learned in his time away from the crowds that God's love is ever emanating from the Trinity (yes, he had a thoroughly Christian Trinitarian understanding in the first century, far beyond his time). He knew these things, because in the eyes of the widows he brought food to, he could see God. He was living into and out of his time of being commissioned. His life was led to that point and came out of that point.

He could see into their eyes and listen as they spoke of their lost loved ones. He gladly brought them something to eat in exchange for hearing their stories. It was as though his heart was wrapped around these widows and he could see into the depths of who they were. Stephen began to let go of those things that mattered most to him previously. Instead of worrying about being one of the chosen twelve, he realized he has been chosen, also. Instead of trying to control himself, he let go and opened himself to these widows. He forgot about his need to be right. And in his ultimate test of faithfulness, Stephen does not curse at people who are throwing stones down upon him, but he blessed them. He asks that they not be held accountable for what they are doing, because they do not realize the gravity of what they are doing.

When we encounter Stephen at his stoning, Stephen does not say these words of forgiveness, because he is the picture of self-control, but because he is the epitome of self-surrender. It is as though he heard Jesus say at the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done." Self-control will allow you to endure people who bother you, it will keep you from yelling at your kids if they annoy you, it will keep you from lashing out in anger at your husband, wife, or co-worker for a time, but it will not let you call out in love on behalf of your murderers. The love and surrender that emanate from Stephen in this passage only come from someone who has spent time in the center, someone who has lived from the heart of God. It is from one who is united with God. Those words

fall from the mouth of one who is not consumed with himself or his legacy. He is not bothered with the accumulation of needless things. He is not consumed with identity or self-image. It is from within Stephen that the words of forgiveness come. It is because he knows how great his forgiveness is that he is able to offer it even as the rocks crash down upon him. This is where the path will lead for us if we continue to empty ourselves, if we continue to allow Christ to fill us up.

As the story that we read earlier ends, Stephen was arrested and stoned. The angered people threw him down and began raining rocks down upon him and as he died he prayed for those who were killing him, using the same words as Jesus to bless his captors. As the rocks dropped from the air and the voices began to fade he surrendered and prayed for his murderers.

Stephen can only say the words he said while being stoned, because he knows who he is. He is a child of God. He is one who is loved without having to do anything. He is absolutely secure, because he is not resting on his own; he is resting in the endless love of God. He is one who lives from the center of who he is, the place God dwells. We choose not to live from this place, because we are unsure of what that will mean for us. Will it mean that we have to stop living the way we are? Will it mean that we have to surrender some of our possessions, power, prestige, and pride? Will we have to change our life goals and plans? Will we have to move out of the way? Will we have to forgive our persecutors, rather than retaliate? Maybe...

“All this is nothing that we can do; it happens to us. The only thing we can do is to get ourselves out of the way. Don’t take ourselves too seriously. Be empty and open and ready; then Christ himself will be your teacher.” Richard Rohr, Simplicity, 115.

“All spirituality is about letting go; how to let go of our security, our good reputation, our identity and self image. All great contemplative teachers lead us in this direction. But because we no longer understand any of this, we have become an addictive society and an addictive Church.” Richard Rohr, Simplicity, 107.

“Emptiness in and of itself isn’t enough. The point of emptiness is to get ourselves out of the way so that Christ can fill us up. As soon as we’re empty, there’s a place for Christ, because only then are we in any sense ready to recognize and accept Christ as the totally other, who is not me.” Richard Rohr, Simplicity, 100.

Richard Rohr (Simplicity, 93) writes, “We don’t save our soul; we discover it. We don’t go there and try to make ourselves holy; we wake our souls up. We’re already united with God; the problem is, we don’t believe it.”