



Community and Condemnation

Birth of the Church

About the Story

Today's passages include two distinct stories; both are stories of the earliest church and occur in Jerusalem.

The first story introduces trouble in one first-generation Christian community—conflict was part of church reality from the start! This conflict is about uneven resource sharing within the community, which includes Hellenist (Greek-speaking) and Hebrew (Aramaic-speaking) Jewish groups. The Hebrew-Hellenist community seeks resolution to the conflict by selecting wise and discerning leaders to serve everyone.

The Point:

God is present in the midst of disagreement, fear, and danger. Even when conflicts arise in our world, in our churches, in our relationships, and in our own lives, God is still there. In this is hope for us: that the one who brought Jesus from death to life will also give us life in those places of death and fear.

Stephen, one of those leaders, is the main character in the next story. He is a faithful follower of Jesus who has performed great acts within the community. Some religious leaders in Jerusalem, however, accuse Stephen of blasphemy (being sacrilegious and speaking against the will of God) claiming he is threatening the temple and the Law of Moses.

Stephen responds with a lengthy speech recalling the history of Israel, and his story does not mention the temple and its significance in the life and rituals of faith. Dismissing the temple's importance leads to the religious council's outrage (Acts 7:54) because this was considered blasphemy against God.

The council's outrage becomes a death sentence for Stephen, who is then publicly stoned to death. At the moment of his death, Stephen asks God to receive him just as he asks God to forgive his murderers. Among the murderers is a man named Saul, a persecutor of Christians, who will later have a dramatic conversion and become the Apostle Paul.

Opening Prayer

Today's story is a difficult one. As you open this gathering, set the tone of a safe space for tough questions. Check in with one another as you wish or open in prayer together:

God of life, thank you for gathering us around your Word. As we face difficult questions in our faith, give us courage to bring our questions to you and to each other. Show us signs of your grace and life, even in the face of death and despair. In your name we pray. Amen.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, the resurrected Jesus was a key figure in our story. Today marks the first story after Jesus' ascension. Next week, the Christian movement continues: we will meet Philip on the road and witness a transformative moment with a person who is marginalized in the community.

Into the Story

The following ice-breaker questions pertain to the two different stories of our passage:

Acts 6:1–7:2a

How do we make decisions at church? How do you make major decisions in your own life?
In your family?

Acts 7:44-60

What difficult stories do you know in the Bible? How do you approach reading or hearing them?

Learning the Story

Today we catch glimpses into the early church community. The first glimpse is into a conflict within the church and into the community's process for resolving the conflict. The second is into the arrest and execution of one of the early church leaders.

Read Acts 6:1-7 – Conflict Within the Church

- ❓ The early church saw conflicts between two different groups of people within the congregation—an “insiders” group and an “outsiders” group. How might these conflicts still exist today in the church? What can each of these groups learn from each other today?
- ❓ What should we look for in selecting leaders in our own church communities?
- ❓ In which areas of our own church ministries might we use this sort of prayerful decision-making?

Read Acts 6:8–7:2a – The Introduction and Arrest of Stephen

- ❓ Stephen is introduced as having done “great wonders and signs among the people.” What sort of wonders do you think he had done? What sort of things do Christians do in our communities today?
- ❓ During this time of the early church's growth in Jerusalem, there were several misconceptions about Christianity. What are some misconceptions about Christianity today?

Bible Connections

- ✚ The ministry of Christians includes both sharing the message of Jesus and serving others with food and hospitality (Luke 22:24-27).
- ✚ Stephen recounts the story of Israel, also present in the Old Testament (Joshua 24, Nehemiah 9, Daniel 9, Psalm 78).
- ✚ Stephen's murder and final words of forgiveness remind us of the final moments in Jesus' own life (Luke 23:32-46).

- ❓ Stephen is accused of blasphemy—that is, speaking against the core understanding of who God is. What is your core understanding of who God is?

Read Acts 7:44-60 – The Speech and Execution of Stephen

- ❓ This section concludes Stephen’s speech to the religious council. What stands out to you in this speech?
- ❓ Both Stephen and the religious council thought their beliefs were life-or-death matters. How does this sort of religious zealotry exist today? What are some examples of good, productive religious interfaith dialogue?
- ❓ The story of Stephen’s execution is a difficult one to read and to process. What can we learn from this story?

Living the Story: Worship

Today’s worship practice is a litany, or list of prayers, for persons around the world who are persecuted. It will center around the song “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying.” Spend five minutes researching stories of persecution or violence. Then alternate singing verses of the song these stories, following this pattern:

“Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” once
 Story 1
 “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” once
 Story 2
 “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” once
 ...and so on.

Supplies

- ✚ Newspapers, news magazines, or Internet-connected devices
- ✚ Optional: guitar or piano

Supplies

- ✚ Map or globe

Closing Prayer

Place your hands on a map of your community, globe, or world map. Participants can name places where people are experiencing persecution in the middle of this prayer or one like it:

God of peace, we pray for people like Stephen who face persecution and death because of who they are and what they believe. Send your Spirit to people in... (places named here)... just as you send your Spirit in this place. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Luke-Acts

The Book of Acts is long understood to have the same author as the Book of Luke. As in the Book of Luke, the author dedicates Acts to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1) In Luke, the author accounts the stories of Jesus: who Jesus is as the fulfillment of Scripture and how that identity shapes his life and ministry. Acts continues this story by telling the stories of Jesus’ first followers, people seeking to live out their identity as the community of Jesus’ followers. In Acts we see how Jesus’ identity shapes the identity of those who follow him.

At Home

- ✚ When facing a decision in your life take the time to prayerfully consider your decision. For what will you pray? How might prayer affect your decision?
- ✚ Learn more about Islam, Judaism, and other faiths, looking for areas of commonality and solidarity. If you have a friend or coworker who is a member of another faith, respectfully ask them to have a conversation about their faith rituals, offering respect and giving thanks for their sharing.
- ✚ Study at least one story of religious persecution or other forms of oppression. Donate to, or research another way, to support an organization fighting against this type of persecution.

Daily Readings**Sunday – Read Acts 6:1–7:2a, 44-60**

Disagreement in one of the first Christian communities. Pray for respectful relationships among persons of different faiths and expressions of faith.

Monday – Read Acts 2:43-47

The early Christian community is marked by wonderful deeds, sharing possessions, worshipping, and breaking bread together. Bake or purchase bread today and deliver it to a friend or a neighbor.

Tuesday – Read Acts 5:12-16

The Christian community is now identified with healings. Send a “thinking of you” card to someone you know who is in need of healing from illness or grief.

Wednesday – Read Acts 5:17-32

Religious leaders persecute the early Christian leaders. Pray for all persons around the world who are persecuted because of their religious beliefs.

Thursday – Read Acts 6:8-15

Stephen is arrested. Today write a letter to someone who is in prison. If you do not know of anyone, ask your pastor for ideas.

Friday – Read Acts 7:1-43

Stephen recounts the history of Israel to the religious leaders who have arrested him. How do you see yourself in the context of Israel’s history?

Saturday – Read Acts 8:4-25

Philip breaks down a cultural barrier by preaching in Samaria. Push through a barrier in your own community today by talking to a stranger or supporting a business in a neighborhood you rarely visit.