

Bringing Light Into the Darkness

Acts 7:55-60
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Elizabeth Gilbert, in her article titled “The Kind Gesture that Helps Elizabeth Gilbert Find the Light On Her Worst Days,” describes being stuck on a crosstown bus in New York City during rush hour. “Traffic was barely moving,” she said (and) the bus was filled with cold, tired people who were deeply irritated – with one another; with the rainy, sleety weather; with the world itself.

Two men barked at each other about a shove that might or might not have been intentional. A pregnant woman got on, and nobody offered her a seat. Rage was in the air; no mercy would be found here. But as the bus approached Seventh Avenue, the driver got on the intercom. ‘Folks,’ he said, ‘I know you’ve had a rough day and you’re frustrated. I can’t do anything about the weather or traffic, but here’s what I can do. As each one of you gets off the bus, I will reach out my hand to you. As you walk by, drop your troubles into the palm of my hand, okay? Don’t take your problems home to your families tonight – just leave ‘em with me. ... Sound good?’ It was as if a spell had lifted,” says Gilbert. “Everyone burst out laughing. Faces gleamed with surprised delight. People who’d been pretending for the past hour not to notice each other’s existence were suddenly grinning at each other” As the passengers got off the bus, placing their troubles in the driver’s hand, Gilbert began to wonder, “What if (we’re) the very agent of illumination that a dark situation begs for? ... You long for the light ...,” says Gilbert, “but what if you are the light, ... (shining forth) one bright act of grace at a time, all the way (home).”¹

We live in a difficult world, making it difficult to be the person – the light – you’d like to be – I’d like to be. And if we’re not bringing light to a dark situation, then we can become lost in the darkness ourselves, or worse yet, part of the problem. There’s a spirit of fear, anger and divisiveness in this world, and more and more it’s leading to tragedy, like young people being shot for just knocking on the wrong door, which happened a couple of weeks ago in Kansas City. Driving in Independence a few days later, Yuri and I needed to turn around, and we drove right past several driveways in order to find a business to pull into; we were afraid to turn around in a stranger’s driveway.

The age of rage is real. And it’s scary. And it’s always been with us. But so has the Spirit of light of brotherhood, sisterhood. We are still the best hope for turning things around, with God’s help, one bright act of grace at a time. So, how do we keep from getting pulled into the darkness; how do we find the presence of mind and the strength of spirit to let our light shine when we come face-to-face with darkness?

¹ Elizabeth Gilbert, “The Kind Gesture that Helps Elizabeth Gilbert Find the Light On Her Worst Days,” *O Magazine*, May 2016. <https://www.oprah.com/inspiration/elizabeth-gilbert-may-2016-o-magazine>. Retrieved July 8, 2022.

In our New Testament lesson today, the disciple Stephen confronts this same spirit of fear, anger and divisiveness and never once does he let his light dim, his faith falter. How do people like Stephen shine brightly even amid such darkness?

Acts tells us that a group from the synagogue was arguing with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke – and that’s Spirit with a capital “S,” the Spirit of God. So “they secretly instigated some men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. ...”

Doesn’t this group remind you of those today who manipulate the system and everyone around them, just to prove their point. These are people who have no faith and don’t trust others to examine the facts and make up their own minds? We see this in politics, at the workplace, with school councils, and even in our neighborhoods and families.

There’s a lack of trust and an obsession with being right, making others wrong. And this gives rise to the cycle of hate, divisiveness and violence we see today. It affects everyone, from those who instigate it to those in charge of preventing it, to the innocent bystanders who get caught up in it. We see this in today’s reading, where the instigators falsely accuse Stephen of blasphemy and, in so doing, they violate the Law of God themselves, bearing false witness against Stephen.

We see this where the people as well as the elders and scribes allow themselves to get all stirred up, suddenly, confronting Stephen, seizing him and bringing him before the council. When they hear Stephen’s testimony, Acts tells us, “They (cover) their ears, and with a loud shout all (rush) together against him.” It’s the mob mentality of the gathered around, no one listening to anyone else, no one seeing the craziness all around them.

Why are we more energized and committed when we’re against something compared to when we support someone or something? Is that just the way human beings are? Maybe so. And if that’s true, then God save us. No, really, I mean it; God save us. Because clearly we can’t save ourselves; not without God.

But if we remain open to the Lord, allow the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts and actions, and trust God to work things out, then we can steer clear of the mob mentality and set our fears aside, knowing that God has this; God will handle the situation and see us through.

Those with faith like Stephen know in their heart of hearts that God will overcome the dark forces of this and every age. We just have to have faith and put our hope in God. Having faith and putting our hope in God, knowing that God loves us and wants the best for all concerned – that’s what enables us to stand strong and let our light shine forth, not giving into the darkness.

Stephen was surrounded by darkness but saw only light. Gazing into heaven, says Acts, "he saw the glory of God," saying, "Look. I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Are you able to do that? Are you able to look to God's glory, instead of getting pulled into the world's darkness? It's not easy. The people around Stephen that day, says Acts, "covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him." They didn't want to hear the truth; they just wanted to vent their anger. And so they did. "... They dragged (Stephen) out of the city and began to stone him." And acts tell us, "The witnesses (to this violence) laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."

The point is, Stephen wasn't going to change who he was as a follower of Christ, no matter how scary things got, not matter what was at stake. Stephen never changed who he was, but Saul did. Saul later meets the Risen Lord and goes from being Saul the Pharisee to Paul the Apostle. As a Pharisee, there wasn't anything Saul wouldn't do to prove himself right. As an apostle, there wasn't anything Paul wouldn't do to prove Jesus right. Paul, like Stephen, proves that faith and hope can and will win out over fear and violence.

So when you're faced with dark times, when you're backed into a corner, when you're sure you're right and everyone else is wrong, ask yourself, are you being Stephen or Saul? And if Saul, are you willing to become like Paul, willing to lay it all on the line for your faith in Jesus and the light he wants to shine into this world through you? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

You, gracious God, are love itself, and perfect love casts out fear. Come to us in merciful patience, to love us from fear to trust, from anger to grace, from doubt to faith.

Love us from our self-centeredness to hearts that willingly give themselves in selfless sacrifice and service.

Love us out of our scarcity and into hearts overflowing with generosity. Love us from brokenness to wholeness, from resentments and forgiveness withheld to forgiveness freely offered, just as it has been freely offered to us.

Come to us, Lord, overwhelming us with your love, that we might love as you first loved us.

In the Spirit of love, we pray for those in need of your comfort and care, your healing and strength.

In the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we pray for ourselves and all people, praying as he taught, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.