

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've eaten out at restaurants quite a bit the last two weeks while we were on vacation. We ate at franchise places known for their specialties and at some local tiny, independent places. I noticed that some restaurants bring food within mere moments of when you placed your order while others seem to take their sweet time about it. I used to get frustrated if my food took a little bit too long, but then I realized sometimes the extra time is because the chef is preparing the food from scratch, while the faster food had been prepared in advance and I was receiving heated up leftovers... I now can appreciate the wait, at least a short wait... Waiting on tables isn't an easy job. Our daughter Niki worked as a server at two different restaurant franchises while going to college. She is a hard worker, and a strong person, but those huge trays loaded with food and drinks can get heavy. After a while, she developed symptoms like carpal tunnel syndrome.

In our scripture for today we're not talking about delays in getting food out to customers, nor delays because the wait staff was too sore or tired to do the serving. We're talking about prejudice overflowing into discrimination. The Hebrew Jews were not sharing fairly with the Greek Jews and it became an issue for this very young, but rapidly growing Church. This unacceptable behavior was threatening to cast a pall onto the good work the fledgling church was doing. The

12 Apostles had to stop their mission of reaching out and evangelizing the world in order to settle the first recorded Church dispute. Their solution was to set up the first Church hierarchy. From almost the beginning the Church had to have organization and differentiation of jobs and tasks that needed to be accomplished. To solve the inequitable distribution of food to the widows, they set up the office of Deacon. A Pastor is ordained into the office of Word and Sacrament, but this new office is one of Word and Service. When we're serving at the FISH Pantry or the Soup Kitchen we're part of the church office created all the way back to this first century division of labor established by the Apostles.

I have no idea what happened to Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, or Nicolaus. I'm certain they served with distinction, but we have no other record of their accomplishments. The only stand out from that first class of Deacons was Stephen. Stephen stood out because he was bold in both his serving and in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Evidently, he took both parts of his commission seriously, Word and Service... I imagine Stephen bringing food to hungry folks and then sitting with them while they enjoy the nourishment, telling them about how Jesus was born sinless, lived sinless and yet took on the sins of all humanity. How this Jesus was killed on a cross for their sins and then on the third day was raised from the dead by the power of the living God. He told them straight up Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah and how Jesus had invited them to

change their lives and follow him. That's how I imagine Stephen... I also imagine Stephen might have been considered the worst waiter of all the Deacons. I mean he spent so much time talking and doing deeds of service and miracles, our text says signs and wonders, he had to be the slowest waiter in history! While other hungry people waited for service, Stephen was busy telling someone about the love of God through Jesus Christ... That's what made Stephen a standout among all the others. It was the way he shared his witness.

Again, I don't know any specifics about those other Deacons who were appointed and commissioned that day, but I know Stephen not only boldly told the story of Jesus, he stood his ground when some unbelievers challenged him. Stephen really did follow Jesus, all the way to death. Every time I read this story of the Church's first martyr, I can't help but notice the similarities between Stephen's last words and the last words of Jesus. How Jesus asked God the Father to forgive those who were crucifying him because they did not know what they were doing. Stephen said basically the exact same thing. Stephen's biggest witness wasn't in the words he spoke to those he served, but in the way he endured his own suffering and trusted in Jesus all the way to the end. His faith allowed him to stand firm even in the face of such extreme hatred that people rose up against him and stoned him to death.

What existential value can we get from Stephen's example? Why is Stephen still relevant for us today? First of all, I don't believe we ever solved the inequitable distribution of food to orphans or widows, or to any of the poor for that matter. The world is still full of poor people who need a helping hand just to survive one more day. Many people justify their own inaction by quoting Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 26, verse 11 when He said, "For you always have the poor with you..." This was right after a woman had poured an entire bottle of expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. The disciples complained that this perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus sided with the woman saying she was preparing his body for burial. Then he said you, "the Church," will always have the poor. Jesus meant that our mission as the Church involved solidarity with the underprivileged, the no accounts, those who have no voice in society. That's why we'll always have the poor, because Jesus wants his Church to eat with them, to share our blessings with them, to be with them in their suffering. Jesus wants His Church to love the poor... That's our calling. To love the poor, not to simply use our incredible riches to provide charity to them. Jesus came for those who needed to hear his message of love and forgiveness. He didn't use his status as the sinless one to Lord it over the sinners, or to isolate himself from them. He ate with them. He

touched lepers. He talked to a Samaritan woman at a well and shared God's forgiveness and love with her. That's the example Jesus gave to us.

Secondly, when we're able to stand up to all the forces that tell us to sit down and remain quiet in the face of inequity and injustice, we show our trust is in a God who's stronger than injustice, stronger than evil and stronger even than death itself. Like Stephen, we forgive our tormenters, not because they deserved to be released, but because we follow the Lord of forgiveness. We are all sinners, people for whom Christ died. So are those who have hurt us. As followers of Christ, we try to forgive others simply because we know how much we need the forgiveness our Lord offers us. A Christian-hater named Saul discovered this after Jesus turned him into the Apostle Paul. "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance," he wrote to his friend Timothy, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners -- of whom I am the foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul preached forgiveness because he had been forgiven. We practice forgiveness because we are also forgiven. God didn't wait for us to clean up our act before God made the first move. Jesus died for us while we were still dead in our sins...

I know we try hard to follow Jesus, to do the work of serving those who are poor and oppressed. We work to make beautiful quilts, school kits, and personal care kits for many of the world's poorest people. We give our time, treasure and talents in so many ways like Wernle Home, the Soup Kitchen, and the FISH Pantry

to name a few. I know many of you also live out your vocation of serving God in the jobs and careers you pursue. I try to do the same. In our serving, let us never use our charity as a way to insulate ourselves from those we serve. Our status as Church members must never become a wedge between ourselves and those we serve. Jesus and Stephen stood out and paid the ultimate price for their efforts because they became humble and loved the poor and oppressed. In our serving we are also called to use our voices. Jesus taught every place he went. Stephen proclaimed the Good News until the end. We who are called to be leaders and Pastors and Deacons are called to offices of Word and Service or Word and Sacrament. I can't help but notice that Word comes first in both. No matter if you are ordained, commissioned or laity, let's all try to remember the advice I give to my grandchildren when they're trying to tell me a story they are excited about... Use your words!

Heavenly Father, in our giving and our serving, may we never lose sight of the real reason Jesus created the Church, to spread His Gospel message of God's love and forgiveness. Help us look to the example of Jesus first and then to the examples of the martyrs like Stephen to gain strength when we are tested. Let us pray we don't come into the time of trial like Jesus or Stephen, but when our faith is put to the test, may we receive power to stand firm, knowing the glory of God's heaven awaits all those who are faithful. May we stand firm to the end. Amen.