

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 14, 2017

Text: Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a; 51-60

Theme: "Not Right"

Sometimes things are just not right. It can be that way when it comes to government operations. We suspect this from little snippets we hear of maybe from someone who is more informed. It doesn't appear good (though this is much that is). It's just not right. On this Mother's Day we know moms do hear complaints about the world of the children not being right. She is expected to make it right and when she does not all are pleased with the righting.

It's not always right in the sports world. Why is it the players on our team are the ones on the disabled list? What's right about it when other team ownership have the funds to buy or at least rent success? "No, just not right," we cry, "Foul!"

We can add many things to this list, not right, not right in the way the world should be as determined by me. It could be big things or it could be little things. Maybe it is I woke up this morning and I could tell right away that I did not feel quite right. There's this annoying stiff neck. You know what I mean, not right.

Oh, I don't want to forget, I have two historical figures to help us with our message. This one, of course is Martin Luther. It is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation this year all year. So he seems appropriate enough. Here is the other, Mr. Potato Head. The CCA kids know this is a particular Mr. Potato Head, Spudly. Of course not really historical, but has a history, appropriate or not we shall see. But since this is Mother's Day, let's put out a third, Katy Luther, more formally Katherine Von Bora Luther. Probably she heard her shares of "not right" from the Luther brood.

“Not right,” was the cry from some in the infant church. Last week we saw how things were going so well, how they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. The church was growing in numbers and that increase included many priests. They were selling their possessions and giving to all according to their need. But now there is a glitch. ‘This is not right,’ so were saying the Hellenists against the Hebrews. The Hellenists were the Greek speaking Jews and the Hebrews Aramaic speaking Jews. In the situation of our text we speaking of converts to Christianity from both these groups.

The Twelve become aware (are made aware?) of the problem. And they say it’s not their problem, not theirs to fix in any case. Their involvement, Peter says, would cause another problem. He said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” (6:2) He’s saying if they step in, devote their time to this, then the preaching of the living word of God would suffer. But they do offer a solution.

Stephen is part of the solution, a big part. He seemed to be on fire, not just with the assigned task. He is full of grace and power. Through him are done signs and wonders. And disputing finds him. He is disputing with some who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen. From the places named as the homeland or cities of these synagogue goers, these would Hellenists. We would assume the dispute centered around Jesus being the Christ. When his opposition could not overcome him with their arguments due to his wisdom and the Spirit they result to false charges. They instigate men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” (6:11) They bring him before the Council and they bring more charges. “...we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs of that Moses delivered to us.” (6:14)

So in chapter 7 Stephen addresses the group, “Brothers and fathers, hear me.” (7:2) He rehearses a bit of the history of Israel going back to Abraham and Moses. This will answer the charge of changing Moses. He then talks of the tabernacle and the temple pointing out that God does not dwell in houses made by hands. His audience listens well enough until he begins to speak of their resistance. “You always resist the Holy Spirit.” (7:51) We certainly have a full demonstration of that resistance. They grind their teeth and stop their ears. Stephen’s description of his heavenly vision feeds their rage. They drag him out and stone him. It’s really mob violence against him. As he is stoned he calls out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and, “Do not hold this sin against them.” (6:60)

“Not right!” so we cry out and so you would think of the brothers and sisters whether Hellenists or Hebrews when they learned of Stephen’s plight. There was one Hellenist there, not yet a convert, who thought it was quite right, Saul of Tarsus.

“It’s not right,” we cry both about small things and bigger affairs. It’s not right when we end up on the short end, that is neglected. Again, moms hear that, and today is one day to remedy in a little way moms being neglected. But this cry extends to many things. It’s not right that others are recognized for their hard work and I am not. Others have this good health, and good jobs, and a happy family, and joy, and well, it just seems not right that it’s not me.

And then others come to me and want me to fix their issues. Now how is that right? It could be family issues or work issues or congregation issues. ‘Just look at this. Now you need to do something about it!’ ‘A good fix would be for him to see it my way.’ You may think it’s nice that others have faith in your abilities, but will you have to neglect something else to get this done? Did you promise more than you can deliver and now is the time for delivering and you are coming up empty? ‘It’s not right to have this put on me!’

“Not right,” we observe as we look at where culture has gone. It’s not right that the moral has become the immoral and the immoral the moral. It’s not right that holding to ones moral principles in your livelihood and business may result in financial loss. It’s not right. There is a problem here!

But Stephen was right. He had nailed the problem. “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.” (7:51) ‘So your fathers, so you.’ They persecuted and killed and now you have betrayed and murdered the Righteous One. Yes, he nails it, and then as we saw, they nail him.

Here’s where Mr. Potato Head comes in. He is an illustration of a stiff neck. He should be ashamed, no smile, but look at him, not changing and pretty proud of the fact. Stiff-necked is a pretty common affliction. It is the way of the old nature that we still carry around. It is likely that some of those Hellenist and Hebrews suffered from it in their assessment of the situation. It was much easier to see the “not right” being inflicted on me than to acknowledge the wronging by me of others. It is much easier to focus on my load and not turn my head a little to recognize the burden on my brother. It is more inviting to focus on my being slighted (at least the perception) than to give thanks with my sister for the blessings she has received.

Stiff necked when it comes to obstinence in unbelief is a course set for destruction, a course for those grinding their teeth in rage against belief to be gnashers of teeth in hell. For those who refuse to let go of their ways and turn to our Lord it actually is a matter of turn or burn.

Things were about to be righted for Stephen. He was given a glimpse of heavenly glory even as the stones were flying. He saw the glory of God and there at His right was the Son of Man, Jesus. Would that not be a beaconing sight? He breathes this last. His

spirit goes to that heavenly place, that Paradise where also was that criminal who cried out to Jesus and all those of faith. His body went to sleep to await the day of resurrection. You see, Stephen went to sleep from his nightmare to a whole new reality of bliss.

That same Son of Man is at God's right hand right now for us. Stiff necks are not right, actually a pain. But by the work of the Spirit we are turned from the way of death to the way of life. As Peter reminds us, 'Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people, once we had no received mercy, but now we have received mercy.' (1 Peter 2:10) Martin Luther standing there with his book, actually God's book, the Bible, reminds us of this turning. But the Spirit working in God's Word he was turned from the torment of reliance on his own works to the bliss and joy of trusting in the completed work of Jesus. Yes, this neck relaxing, head turning work is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Here is rest, rest from the burden of our sin. Christ carried it all for us, atoned for it all in His death. Now He is there at the Father's right hand for us, the risen, ascended and reigning Jesus. We will know the glory forever and now we know the joy of fully serving Him as His workmanship. There is work, a part, a need for all of us.

It's not right, said Peter, that we should neglect the preaching of the word to wait tables. He was not saying tables should not be waited. Peter knew there were those among them who were more than capable, gifted for this work and more. So the Seven were chosen to serve and serve they did. It is the body of Christ, many parts, many members, members one of the other. If my focus is on how the church can serve me, which it certainly does, then my focus is wrong directed, not right. It's how God has given me the opportunity to serve the body. More good will be done and more heads will be turned—more convicted of sin and convinced of the Savior will say, "Yes, my Lord, yes, use me!"

“Not right!” Obvious we were not right before God, dead in trespasses and sins, but we have been declared right, called out of darkness to His marvelous light that we may declare the One who is right and go forth to do His right. For Jesus’ sake. Amen