

Micro Graces
A Sermon on Acts 7:55-60 by the Rev. Philip Major
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What do you think of the story of the stoning of Stephen? I have a few thoughts. It helps to consider the larger context for our passage. The book of the Acts of the Apostles is the second volume written by the author of Luke. Luke and Acts were written seventy or eighty years after the events described in these books. By this time the Jewish churches and the emerging Christian churches were distinct, separate groups.

At the first Easter almost all of the followers of Christ were Jews. By the time the book of Acts was written, very few of the followers of Christ were Jews. The main purpose is to tell the story of the growth of the church. But the secondary purpose of the book of Acts is to explain how the church of Christ followers, which was originally almost 100% Jewish, gradually came to be comprised mostly of Gentiles.

After the story of Pentecost in chapter two of Acts, there is a group of four stories about the Apostles in chapters three through seven. Each of these stories is about conflicts between the Apostles and the Jewish people and leaders. One of the odd things is that every single one of the Apostles is Jewish, and yet their opponents are pointedly described as ‘the Israelites’ or as ‘the leaders of the Jews’. The author of Acts is placing the conflict between the followers of Christ and the Jews in the center of the story.

This theme continues in chapters six and seven. In the sixty verses that lead up to today’s passage Stephen has been criticizing the leaders and the Jewish people as a whole. There are some noteworthy examples of the theological smack down move. A few verses before today’s passage Stephen concludes with this denunciation: *You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to.* Moments later Stephen’s opponents pick up stones and put an end to this particular argument.

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. This is a powerful, dramatic story.

I’m gradually becoming more convinced that the story of the stoning of Stephen is not especially helpful for us. It’s not that I don’t think the story is true. It seems likely the story is true. I just think that, in most situations you and I face in our lives, the story might distract us from what needs our attention.

My confidence that this story is not especially helpful does not come from spending more time studying the book of Acts. My confidence does not come from taking seminary courses about the history of the early church. As I spend more time as a disciple I am more confident that the story of the Stephen is not especially helpful because of all of you.

I’m not sure how this happened, but by God’s grace I came to this position in life where I spend forty hours each week surrounded by people who are in some way disciples of Jesus. I spend most of my waking hours talking with about one hundred fifty disciples of Jesus, working with them, sending them text messages, and thinking about the work God is calling us to do.

I am surrounded by people who are trying to follow Jesus. The people around me have heard many of these stories about Jesus, and much of the rest of scripture. In some cases, they have been paying attention to these stories for ten or twenty years or even longer.

The people around me have heard what Jesus told his disciples during the last supper. One month ago, at Maundy Thursday, we heard these words again, *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will*

know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. I am surrounded by people who are trying to be witnesses to the power of God's love in our lives.

There have been two or three times in my life when I was with some of these disciples when they were in situations that were not too different from Stephen's situation. And once or twice I heard someone say words that were almost like what Stephen said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." It was powerful to see someone respond with love in response to a violent attack on them.

But even more, it has changed my life to see people following Jesus' commandment for us to love one another in much smaller, less noticeable ways. One can dismiss a single person's courageous statement as an exceptional act of bravery. For me there is only one explanation for the continuous stream of thousands of daily acts of love and kindness that surround us.

There is a community of people who have responded to God's call for us to be witnesses to the power of love. These people have responded by emptying out some part of themselves, by turning away from their potential to respond with anger, with aggression, with selfishness. The empty space in their lives is being filled by God's grace.

I see God's grace in their many actions, every single day. Some of these actions are so tiny, they are almost impossible to see. These tiny actions of grace are often happening almost completely inside of them. I recall many times when someone just listened patiently to another with love and concern. Their willingness to be silent and to let the other person speak, was a sign of God's grace in them.

These constant, tiny actions of love are small, but critically important for us. I have decided them to give them a new name. I call them "micro graces". A few years ago I heard a new phrase: "micro aggressions". I'm not sure if the idea of micro aggressions is always helpful for us. I think the idea of "micro graces" is extremely helpful for us.

The idea of 'micro graces' is helpful because it's real. This is what is really happening in my life, and I trust, in yours. You and I are living in a community of people who are striving to follow Jesus' commandment for us to love one another. Most of the time, the opportunities we are given to respond to others with love are not really dramatic. Most of the time, our opponents are not trying to kill us, or to throw stones at us. And yet we have many opportunities each day to be witnesses to the power of God's love in our lives. Most of these opportunities are so small that no one else even notices. Yet we try to respond to other people and to difficult situations with love, even though no one else is paying attention and no one else will even notice that we are bringing love to other people.

The idea of 'micro graces' is also helpful because it helps us remember the source for these actions of love: it all comes from a gift we call 'grace'. God has given us the greatest gift, the greatest power in the world. God has placed a kernel of love in the center of our lives. You and I make room for this love to grow.

God is the source for any of the grace that comes from us. We are far from perfect; it makes no difference. God's grace and love are far greater than our weakness. As long as we are making space for that love, as long as we are intent on nurturing the love God has given us, tiny acts of love will come from us each day.

The love in our lives is nourished by studying scripture, by worship, and by prayer and contemplation. But Jesus was right about this point; what we really need is to be part of this community together. Most of the time the little bits of love and kindness we give, and the little bits of love and kindness we receive, are tiny. They are so small that we may not even notice we are giving and receiving them. Yet in this blessed community that is the body of Christ we are constantly giving and receiving micro graces. By this everyone will know that we are disciples of Christ.