

Grace & Peace to you, dear siblings in Christ.

You know what it's like to turn on the TV and catch the last 5 minutes of a show you don't watch. You don't really know the characters. You don't know what's just happened, or the people's relationships or backstories. You are just in the moment of what is taking place. Now, when this happens – you probably do one of 2 things –get sucked into the drama, even though you don't have all the information OR you are completely disinterested.

For better or worse, that's the situation we find ourselves in today with our reading from Acts. I'll take the blame on that one. This is a story whose main character is Stephen, the Deacon, so I couldn't let it slip away. I **had** to preach about this deacon.

So hopefully, you're intrigued by the drama and mystery of the story – let me fill you in on what has happened so far this “season” of the Acts of the Apostles. Back in chapter 6 – the Greek speaking widows (who were kind of social outsiders in the predominantly Hebrew community) weren't getting served from the church food line and the Greeks had started to complain. The apostles didn't want to be bothered with the equitable provision of food – but wanted to focus on prayer and teaching. So they chose Stephen and 6 other Greek guys to be set apart from

the believers for a special role of service in the early church. **Ta Da!** The first deacons are ordained!

Just 4 verses later, and Stephen has knocked everybody's socks off. Not only is he using his cultural knowledge as a Greek-speaker to serve those who had been overlooked by the Hebrew apostles, but NOW he's so full of the Holy Spirit that he's doing great wonders and signs among the people. The spotlight has shifted and he's the first great **Deacon-superhero of the Bible**.

Turns out, not everybody saw him as a hero. 😞

There was a kind of coalition of Jews from the Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora around the Mediterranean that didn't really like what he was saying. These folks from places like modern-day Libya, Egypt, and Türkiye argued with Stephen and confronted his teachings.

“But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated some men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’” (Acts 7:10-11)

“As a result of this theological dispute Stephen was falsely accused of blasphemy.”¹ This coalition initiated a backlash against him, and he was arrested by the Jewish authorities. Does this remind you of anyone?

¹ Peter Shirokov, “Jerusalem Synagogue of the Freedmen” found at <https://israelbiblicalstudies.com/blog/category/jewish-studies/jerusalem-synagogue-freedmen-prof-peter-shirokov-eteacherbiblical/>. Accessed 5/1/26.

Now in your TV program, this would probably be the end – a tense cliff-hanger type of scene to make sure you watch the next episode. We don't have time for that. I'm sure you're coming back next week anyways!



Stephen and the Dispute before the Sanhedrin, Fresco, by Niccolina Angelico, Cappella Niccolina, Palazzi Pontifici, Vatican

Dear Deacon Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, which is basically the highest church tribunal.

He's charged with this horrible act of blasphemy and then Stephen just **unleashes** his Spirit-filled preaching on them ... like ... a LOT. And the non-Jesus-believing folks (and **all** their ancestors) are disdained as ones who are unfaithful to God. He even proclaims in his sermon, 'you have become betrayers and murderers.' (Acts 7:52).

"No wonder they want him dead."²

² Philip Ruge-Jones, *Commentary on Acts 7:55-60: Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A)*. WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 4/26/26.

Where our Acts reading picks up today – ALL of this has just happened. So here is an angry crowd of religious insiders. The vitriol and hatred in the air are palpable. They are enraged, insulted, driven to murderous violence.³

And yet, Deacon Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit. His gaze is on the Lord Jesus's glory. In the midst of such horrific violence, Stephen prays – both for himself and for those who have stood against him. Sounds a lot like Jesus on the cross, doesn't it?

“Stephen is able to love so recklessly because he has entrusted himself to Jesus.”⁴

Knowing the full dramatic story of the call, ministry, and martyrdom of Stephen – makes me feel affirmed to follow in the footsteps of one so faithful they would even face death to remain devoted to Christ. I realize, not all of you are going to get as excited as I do to learn about this great **Deacon-superhero of the Bible**.

BUT Each of us have this same call in our baptisms – the call to

**“Learn to trust God,
Proclaim Christ through word and deed,
Care for others and the world God made,**

³ Leviticus 24:14 contains the ordinance that a blasphemer be stoned to death “outside the camp.”(<https://comments.montrealcathedral.ca/aeas51.shtml>).

⁴ Ruge-Jones.

and work for justice and peace.”

You may not be called to serve food to widows, but you are called to care for those who need compassion.



Holy Spirit Fire and Baptismal Font, Painting, Mexicali, Mexico

You may not be called to stand in the pulpit on a Sunday morning or before a great crowd, but you are called to proclaim Christ through both words and actions.

You may not be called to Holy Fire Preaching to the highest political authorities, but you are called to work for justice.

You may not be called to martyrdom, but you are called to pray for your enemies.

Have you been called to feed others, or wash dishes, or be a smiling face in the world?

Have you been called to teaching, parenting, encouraging of those developing in the faith?

Maybe you been called to reach out with a phone call, or invitation, or act of kindness to someone who is isolated or lonely.

Or maybe you been called to help behind the scenes, or share your musical gifts, or give rides to neighbors, or grow garden vegetables to share, or be on the board of a non-profit, or steward creation, or advocate for justice at the legislature.

I do not know the specific call that God has placed upon you.

But I do know that God has uniquely gifted you, filled you with the Holy Spirit, and shown you signs of Jesus at work for you to see and hear.

You are a claimed and called servant of God. Sustained by the Spirit and presence of God – both now and forever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.