

# Fifth Sunday of Easter

## LOUD AND LOUDER

Acts 7:55-60

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## Analysis by Marcus Felde

55But filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56Look, he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60Then 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.

*Quick overview: I perceive an ironic contrast between two uses of the Greek, fone megale: the crowd using a "loud shout" to attack Stephen; and Stephen using a "loud shout" to announce their forgiveness. In between, God has worked on Stephen as God always works on people, to overcome our sin.*

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## DIAGNOSIS: "With a Loud Shout Rushing Together Against"

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *Can't Hear You!*

"They covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him" and killed him. First laying their coats

at the feet of a young man named Saul so they wouldn't get dirt and blood on them. Then picking up stones and throwing them. All the while keeping up a din that would perhaps keep them from backing down. Or hearing any more of what Stephen had to say. Because he was pricking their skin. Calling them "stiff-necked." The impudence! Surely they had heard all they needed to hear from God. They knew what they believed.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Won't Listen!*

Stephen diagnosed his accusers. He told them that their refusal to hear the Good News about Jesus paralleled their ancestors' refusal to listen to Moses, or, worse, to actually keep the Law once he delivered it to them. Sure, they possessed God's law. But did they really hear it? Not in Stephen's telling of their history, and he pulls up some indisputable stories. Not being willing to listen to the Holy Spirit of Jesus, they are once again to be found in opposition to God.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *No Spirit (Empty Lungs)*

Ironically, they who are stoning Stephen are the ones out of whom the Wind has been knocked. They are breathless now. They gasp for God's love, but . . . nothing. Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, they are lifeless without God.

**PROGNOSIS: In a Loud Voice, Kneeling ...**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *A Louder Cry (from Empty Lungs!)*

Stephen draws the deepest breath he can and announces the Gospel so loud that, even over the shouting and rock-throwing, they heard it: He called upon God to forgive them. His imitation of Jesus, reminding them of how Jesus gave his spirit into God's hands and asked forgiveness for his executioners, points them (and us) to the salvation Jesus offered the world from the cross. He shouts forgiveness so loud that it cancels out their

opposition to God, inviting them even in that dire emergency to repent and trust in Jesus.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Hearing Jesus*  
Stephen could not have done such a generous thing except that he listened to Jesus. He noticed how Jesus went to his death. He noted how becoming it was of God, to offer his Son and give his Spirit to the very people who had disappointed him. Stephen believed, and it was counted unto him as righteousness. Stephen's martyrdom didn't save him, hearing Jesus did.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *(Not Drowning) Kneeling*

I want to think that Stephen's kneeling to pray when he was being stoned was an exquisite demonstration of the love of Christians even for their enemies. He didn't try to prove what a man he was by standing as long as he could. He was content, in that moment, to suffer while being conscious of God-to borrow from the Second Reading for Easter 4 (I know that was last Sunday! But listen):

*19For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 21For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.*

*22"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."*

*23When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

*25For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*

This is the fruit the Word of God bears in us, that “free from sins, we . . . live for righteousness.” Once we were loudmouths, but now we are active listeners—and that brings God’s peace. Because, just as Christ suffered for us, we follow in his steps.