

Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Great Reversal

Acts 7:55-60

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

55But filled with the Holy Spirit, he 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.



The Martyrdom of St Stephen – Annibale Carracci

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Annibale_Carracci

When the good news of this message sweeps us off our feet and captivates our hearts, we believe the impossible: that God loves us and will vindicate us even as we are crushed by the deadly cycle of getting back and getting even.

DIAGNOSIS: The Deadly Cycle of Payback

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Getting Back and Getting Even

Who among us has not found themselves the victim of an unjust attack? A punch in the stomach, betrayed by a friend, falsely accused, pulverized by the mob's misguided anger ... and, (as we

see in today's reading), stoned to death for just confessing our faith. We cry: "It's not fair!"

Things must be set right. The scales of justice must be balanced. The debt must be repaid. We demand our "pound of flesh." It is time to get back and get even!

Such was the response of the religious leadership and the raging mob to the testimony of Stephen. Stephen's declaration that he sees Jesus (the Son of Man) "sitting at the right hand of God" was blasphemous and insulting to these pious Jews. These are the ones who had already put Jesus to death for undermining the Word of God and the moral fiber of their godly society. God's holiness demanded justice. In the name of God, they must get back and get even. Such a wrong must be rectified. Someone must pay for this. Stephen would pay just as Jesus paid ... with his life. For Stephen it would not be on a cross but in a brutal and bloody stoning.

We too are caught up in a world dedicated to "getting back and getting even." When we feel unfairly and unjustly treated, we want the scales of justice to be balanced. Revenge becomes the name of the game. "Punching back" is righteous and justified.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Calling the Shots

The offended leadership and enraged mob could not allow Stephen to insult their religious faith with his reckless affirmation of Jesus. Convinced that they had the divine right to "call the shots," their execution of Stephen would be justified and godly. When you believe that you have the divine right to balance the scales of justice, then even the taking of another's life is simply setting things right.

We often feel the same way when we are unjustly wronged. We feel entitled to "call the shots" and get back and get even. We even

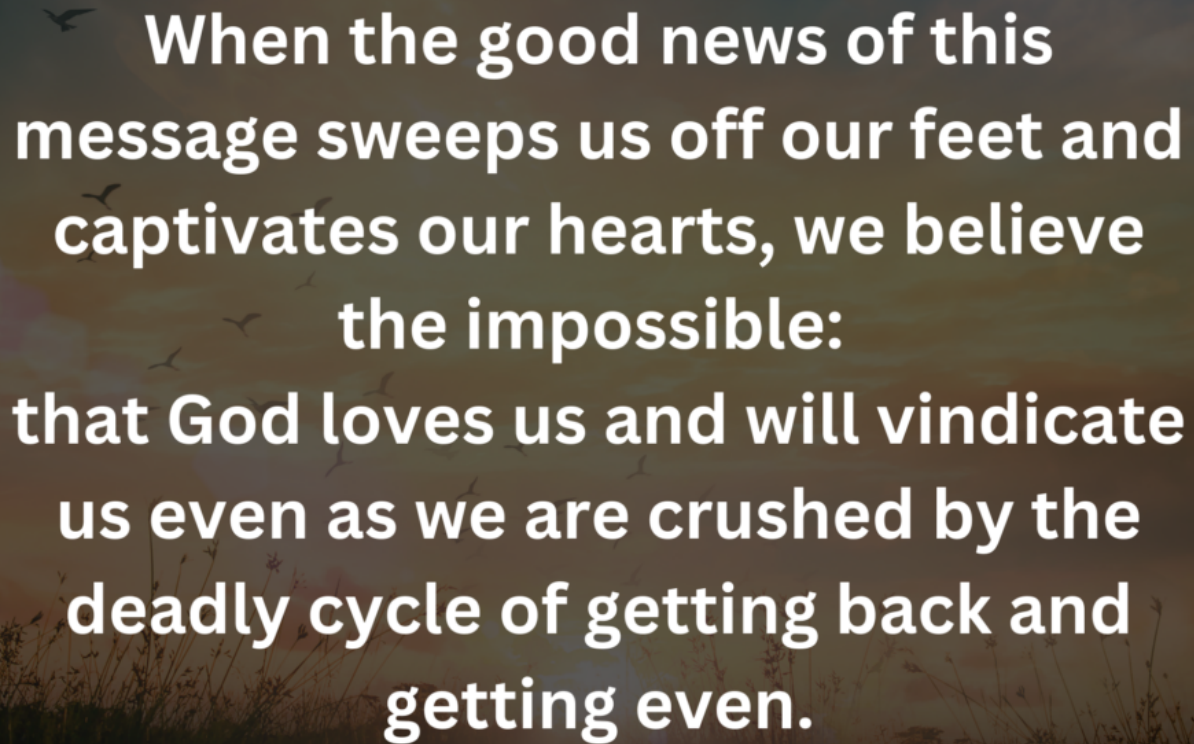
may feel divinely authorized to exact our revenge and get our pound of flesh. Such thoughts may even have crossed the mind of Stephen. There is no evidence in the text that he did. However, such a desire to “call the shots” and play God has been the default position of every human being since Genesis 3.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Trapped in the Deadly Cycle

Insulted and enraged, the mob punched back. The stones began to fly. Justice must be done. Stephen must pay. He did. Even that about-to-become-famous spectator, Saul, must have taken silent delight in this righteous execution of someone who dared to offend the holiness of God.

Our experiences confirm the same reality. We get back and get even. We put our oppressors in their place. We enjoy our “pound of flesh.” But before we know it, the tables are turned. Someone accuses us of mistreating them. They want their revenge. They must get back and get even. We are under attack.

There is no escaping this deadly cycle of getting back and getting even. We are all stuck in the muck of its seductive appeal to call the shots. We believe that God is on our side as we get back and get even. The bloody wreckage of history reveals how much humans are unable to escape this primeval desire to play God and call the shots. No one escapes. No one gets out alive. God does not look kindly on those who think they can play God.



When the good news of this message sweeps us off our feet and captivates our hearts, we believe the impossible: that God loves us and will vindicate us even as we are crushed by the deadly cycle of getting back and getting even.

PROGNOSIS: The Interruption of Mercy

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Giving Up My Rights

Stephen appears to be just another victim of the endless cycle of getting back and getting even. He was crushed by the wheels of justice, even if we think it was unfairly done. However, there is something utterly odd in this account of the stoning of Stephen. As unjust as his execution was, he does not complain, protest, or resist. He willingly accepts his fate and then dares to forgive those who are executing him: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

His death is remarkably similar to the death of Jesus. Like Jesus, Stephen willingly accepted his deadly fate. Like Jesus, Stephen willingly asks God to “receive my spirit.” Like Jesus, Stephen willingly forgives those who are killing him. Like Jesus, he willingly renounces his right to get back and get even. Like Jesus, he sacrifices himself and gives up his right to demand his due.

There is only one way to explain this amazing behavior of Stephen: the power of Jesus in his life. Jesus willingly gave up his right to justice and fair treatment. He paid. He did not seek to get his pound of flesh from those who so unfairly treated him. He did it trusting that the deadly cycle of pay back would not be the last word from his Father. When Jesus was raised on “the third day,” it is clear that his faith was not in vain.

The church joyously proclaims that because of Jesus, sins are forgiven. Mercy has broken the inevitable cycle of getting back and getting even.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting the Promise

Stephen trusts the promise of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Therefore, Stephen swallows his pride and gives up his right to get back and get even. Because Stephen trusted that Jesus’ fate would also be his, he was able to do the unthinkable: forgive his enemies.

That same kind of amazing life is ours. When the good news of this message sweeps us off our feet and captivates our hearts, we believe the impossible: that God loves us and will vindicate us even as we are crushed by the deadly cycle of getting back and getting even. Even as we are “stoned” by our enemies, we can confidently say to our heavenly Father, “Receive my spirit.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Interrupting the Cycle

Stephen interrupts the cycle of payback with mercy, just like his Lord. By refusing to push back, he exemplifies a new way to live. Like the one who has gone before him, he can “turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile and love his enemies.” As such he offers a glimpse of a new way of life where people are not perpetually engaged in conflict, always wanting to get back and get even and always bent on revenge.

We too can begin to live this new kind of life by interrupting the deadly cycle with mercy. It will not be easy as the world invites and taunts us join the fray and punch back. That is why those to have caught Stephen’s vision always need to pray, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”