

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
April 22, 2018

Steadfast! And Let God Continue to Write His Story!

- 1. “Steadfast” Involves Witnessing Whose I Am**
- 2. “Steadfast” Involves Whose I Will Be**
- 3. “Steadfast” Involves Witnessing to the End**

Acts 7:1-8:8

Let's cut to the chase. Are we willing to *die* for Jesus? It seems we are willing to LIVE for him...sitting in the comfort of these seats. Is his moral code in the commandments simply more logical than “free love” in a cannabis-rich society where life is dictated by ME? Yet, how *far-reaching into* your life is Jesus “good for”? Can you LIVE for him when living for him results in being ridiculed for him? Can you LIVE for him if it would result in you DYING for him?

Our brother, Stephen, would weigh in this morning: “You are willing to *live* for Jesus...but in the *living* can come the *dying*. Are you still willing?”

What is YOUR “cause” in life? Most people have one. Friday is National Arbor Day. Some will plant a tree to teach their kids about giving back to God and managing his creation. Others will plant hundreds of trees to “**Save the Planet!**” for generations to come. How close-to-the-heart is your CAUSE? How VISIBLE are you in making an impact?

Are you a *Christian*? Are we as passionate about living for our Jesus as some are about the forests or about rescuing animals or about the debate on school safety and gun control? What or who gets your ire up? What or who brings a smile of delight? Who is your champion for whose cause you *stand firm*? What is your cause for which you are “steadfast”? For what cause do you live?! For what cause would you die?

1. “Steadfast” Involves Witnessing Whose I Am

Jesus Christ completed Act I of His Story on Good Friday as the stone was rolled across his tomb. After Intermission Saturday, Act II began on Sunday morning as his resurrection to life created a ripple on the water of this world “*from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria...to the ends of the earth.*”

Act II rolled into the life of Stephen in the city of Jerusalem and swept him up in the joy of a personal Savior from sin, and the personal vision of “life after death with God the Father” as surely as Jesus walked out of his tomb!

Luke tells us that Stephen was *“a man full of God’s grace and power, performing great wonders and signs among the people.”* In other words, Stephen’s life had become all about his Jesus and his salvation, so much so that the Name of Jesus and the gifts of the Spirit of God just flowed out of him! He was God’s man, and Stephen was thrilled to tell the world “God’s man is who I am!” And the signs and wonders got the world’s attention...and Stephen pointed to Jesus.

But living one’s life in such a way does not come without consequences! Ponder what John says in his first letter about Cain, the firstborn son of Adam and Eve: *“Do not be like Cain, who murdered his brother. And why did Cain murder Abel? Because Abel’s actions were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.”*

Did Stephen see his death coming as his life was shining brightly for Jesus as he talked about sin and about God’s forgiveness in the One Man, Jesus? Did Stephen see his death coming as he blasted the Jewish leaders in their steadfast unbelief? I don’t know at what moment Stephen knew he was going to die, but Stephen had always known the potential—and he was steadfast! His Savior had said: *“Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”*

The cross is most precisely *“suffering a Christian experiences because of Jesus”*—belonging to him, being his man, his woman--witnessing that HIS is Who I Am! Living for Jesus in every moment, every decision...even if it brings suffering...even if it brings dying.

Application Act II of Jesus’ story. We are living it! And do you have a “bit part” in his story or is your part a major one? Well, take a look at the screen. If the screen is eternity and the point of light is your earthly life of 60, 70 or 80 years, is your part in Jesus’ salvation story as small as the dot or as large as forever? **And how does your perception of your reality shape your living?**

2. “Steadfast” Involves Whose I Will Be

How did Stephen handle that question? Well, Stephen felt the hatred of the Jewish leaders and he had a clue that his life was hanging in the balance. But he also knew that his Savior was fully in control even in the midst of their hate and that he would never slip from his Savior’s grasp! So Stephen continued to shine for Jesus, to speak for his Savior, to be unafraid in his living! He was steadfast in the promise of Jesus: *“He who believes in me will live, even though he dies...so take up your cross and follow me.”*

We are told by the Spirit that *“all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”* What do you see with that statement? To me, the *face of an angel* would glow with the glory of God—either visibly or figuratively! There would be no fear in the eyes, no worry on the brow, and no swallowing hard before speaking. There would be peace and joy and confidence--vision of what will be by the power and promise of God!

Jesus has promised, ***“When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”***

And so Stephen kept on being “God’s man” with his vision of forever—the best is yet to come! And God in his mercy let Stephen’s physical eyes see what in faith he already knew, ***“Jesus standing at the right hand of God”*** with power and authority...and love for his people!

Application Act II of Jesus’ story. Are you in it for a *bit* part, or do you wish to play a **MAJOR** role for your children, your family, your friends? Do you know your lines? HOW will you witness? How DO you live? What ARE you saying to your world?

Training to witness is one of the reasons why we are here. **Coaching** from Jesus involves time in his Word. **Praying** for strength is KEY to the living--differently than the world. **Practicing** our elevator speech can begin with John 3: ***“God so loved...that he gave his...Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”*** **Trusting** your Jesus will give you the steadfastness he showed in one life lived that changed it all! ***“He who believes in me will live...”***

3. “Steadfast” Involves Witnessing to the End

Steadfastness in witnessing is what the Jews SAW. But steadfast in their hatred of Jesus is where they remained. Stephen was NOT the problem, it was this Jesus of Nazareth! But to wipe out Jesus they had to shut Stephen’s mouth...and the mouths of everyone like him!

My mother would have said “they were so mad they were spitting tacks”, but the Spirit says ***“they gnashed their teeth at him”*** -- closing in for the kill! And when Stephen put into words what he was seeing with his eyes, ***“the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”***, they covered their ears, yelled at the top of their voices, rushed at him, dragged him and stoned him to death.

But Stephen was steadfast in his witnessing even to the end. ***While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit – in the big picture, I will live!”*** Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ***“Lord, do not hold this sin against them—may they still repent and be saved.”*** When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Steadfastness in witnessing is to **give them Jesus** even to the end. Jesus alone teaches praying for your enemies, ***“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,”*** and so Stephen did! Free in his Savior to witness come what may, Stephen prayed--there were souls to save! And Stephen? Well, he is good! He stands with his Jesus this day!

Application Act II of Jesus' story. Stephen had a bit part as far as the number of pages in a book, but he had a HUGE part to play in the ripple on the water and in the history of the kingdom of God! It is NOT a stretch to say that he is still speaking today, and that you and I believe in Jesus and are willing to live and to die for him in part BECAUSE of Stephen! Stephen knew his witnessing had eternal implications for individuals and for the team! ***“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church and all except the apostles were scattered. Saul began to destroy the church going from house to house. But those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”***

The ripple of the good news of Jesus came to Muskego over 160 years ago and it resonates still in our very being this day. What will WE do with that? What did Stephen DO with that? Well, the same thing our champion did with it! The Spirit says that ***“Jesus shouldered his cross and set his face to go to Jerusalem”*** to die that we might live. Good Friday was his Act I – death for our sin to wash it away and to take away fear of God. Easter Sunday began his Act II and he has cast us into his story. Steadfast in our trust and in our witness, let us live and die for him!

Conclusion ARE we willing to die for Jesus? Now, before we all step up with the Apostle Peter and say, ***“Sign me up! Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will, Lord!”*** – take a deep breath. God may not ask you to die *FOR* him, but he has commanded you to *LIVE* for him. That said, let's remember the coaching of our brother Stephen: “You are willing to *live* for Jesus...but in the *living* can come the *dying*. Are you still willing?”

Steadfast in our witness? It is whose we are and what we do...and God will continue to write his story! Amen.

Prepared by Pastor Nate Strobel
414-422-0320, ext. 293
nstrobel@stpaulmuskego.org