

DIACONAL SUNDAY

February 23, 2014

Celebrating witness expressed through service (diakonia) and leadership offered by the ELCIC's diaconal ministers.

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. —Matthew 5:44

A Bible Study on Stephen: Deacon and First Christian Martyr

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6 NRSV)

The Christian community at the time was made up of mainly Jews. It was difficult for Jesus' apostles to meet the needs of the whole community. Apparently the Hellenists (Jews born outside of Israel who spoke Greek) were feeling less served. Stephan ministered to the Greek speaking Jewish community, some accepted the gospel of Christ but others were not open to it. Stephen did wonders in his ministry to the people. Not all appreciated his gift of service to the community. Some from the community devised a plot to have Stephen arrested. He was falsely accused of leading the people against the customs of Moses. Stephen remained calm as the lies and accusations by the Sanhedrin's were thrown his way. We read, *and all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel* (Acts 6:15). Stephen then had an opportunity to address his opponents. What he said infuriated the council. He was driven out and stoned to death. (Acts 7:58-59) Stephen's last words before his death were to ask the Lord to forgive those who had stoned him. *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. (Acts 7:60 NRSV)

"We are not likely to face death by stoning, but we may face other kinds of death. If we live the life that Christ commands, we may have uncomfortable decisions to make at work or in our families. We will have to live a life that's unlike the lives we see depicted in popular culture. That's not always easy, but in the end, we can hope the resistance to the most pernicious forms of popular culture will have been worth it." (Kristin Berkly-Abbott *Stephen and the Innocents Blogs* 12/27/2013, www.elca.org.)



Prayer

Gracious God, you have called each of us in service to you. You have laid on our hearts your needs and the needs of the people. We pray that you will use us in diakonia work as exemplified by deacons and deaconesses: Stephen, Miriam, Deborah, Philip, Phoebe and Priscilla. You have called certain people to special ministries in the church, we ask that you bless each in their ministry of Word and Service and you will walk with each as they serve in your name. Dear God send your Holy Spirit on this church to encourage all who serve you, that they might know the world of justice. Encourage your people to take up the call and seek out entry into ministry in the church. The need is great. We thank you for your love and compassion as you accompany us on our journeys. Amen.

