

Easter 6 - A (2020)
Acts 7:55-60 1 Peter 3:13-18

Do you recognize these names: Wilma Rudolph, Mariano Rivera, Serena Williams, Abby Wambach, Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt? I'm sure you could think of more, but I want to add one more specifically for today: Stephen from our 1st Bible reading from Acts today. It's possible that they're all GOATs.

In the world of sports, being a goat is usually a negative.

You do something really bad -- something that messes up a game, a series or even your career.

Maybe you remember baseball player Bill Buckner, who made a fielding error that cost the Boston Red Sox game six of the 1986 World Series.

Or basketball player Chris Webber, who called a timeout that his team didn't have. His mistake caused the Michigan Wolverines to lose the 1993 NCAA championship.

One simple error and you become a sports goat.

But sometimes, being a goat is a good thing. As in G-O-A-T: Greatest Of All Time.

By definition, former New York Yankees pitcher Mariano Rivera is a GOAT. Probably the greatest relief pitcher of all time, he achieved more than 650 saves and a stellar postseason record.

Soccer star Abby Wambach is a GOAT, with the record for the most career goals in international matches, more than any other man or woman. To be the greatest, you have to set records and win either world championships or Olympic medals. This puts Michael Phelps at the pinnacle of swimming GOATs, and Usain Bolt at the top of the sprinting GOATs. No surprise that his nickname was "Lightning." Lightning Bolt.

In tennis, you could argue that Serena Williams is a GOAT, with more than 20 major singles titles. Or Steffi Graf, who won 22 majors in the 80s and 90s. Michael Jordan is a basketball GOAT, with six NBA championships.

Or, to go back even further in history, consider Wilma Rudolph (1940-1994). Rudolph was considered the fastest woman in the world in the 1960s. In the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, Rudolph became the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field during a single Olympic Games and was known as "the Tornado, the fastest woman on earth." As a track and field champion, she elevated women's track to a major presence in the United States. As a member of the African-American community, she is also regarded as a civil rights and women's rights pioneer. In short, you could say she, too, was one of the 20th-century GOATs.

So who are the GOATs of the Bible? Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David, Isaiah, Mary, Joseph and of course Jesus himself -- the one who, according to the Bible, is "the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand" (Acts, 7:56) and the indisputable Greatest Of All Time! But many GOATs are not well-known - they include individuals such as Stephen, the first martyr of the church. He's got to be a GOAT of some kind.

I talked a little bit about the early church last week as it was formed, but as it began to grow, it needed structure and so the church selected seven men of good standing and gave them the job of waiting on tables (vv. 2-3). The first of these is Stephen, "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (v. 5).

Stephen began to serve the Christian community beyond waiting on tables and became known for the "great wonders and signs" he did among the people (v. 8). In our Bible reading for today from Acts, his opponents in the synagogue argue with him and orchestrate charges against him, accusing him of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God (v. 11).

The people of Jerusalem become angry, as do the elders and the scribes. Stephen is seized and brought before the council, where the high priest asks him, "Are these things so?" (7:1).

Stephen takes a deep breath, and then begins to speak. He takes his audience on a tour of the mighty acts of God, beginning with Abraham in Mesopotamia and ending with the deaths of the prophets and Jesus

himself. Stephen concludes with a statement that boldly speaks the truth to power: "You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet *you have not kept it*" (v. 53).

For a moment, the council is stunned. Never before have they been spoken to in this way. Then they become enraged and begin to grind their teeth (v. 54).

Knowing that he is in trouble, Stephen puts himself in the hands of God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he looks upward and says, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at God's right hand!" (v. 56).

His words make the council even more furious, and with a shout they rush together against him. Dragging him out of the city, they begin to stone him, and as the rocks are raining down on him he prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he kneels down and cries out his final words, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (vv. 57-60).

So, what is it that makes Stephen a GOAT: Greatest Of All Time? He knows the story of God's mighty acts, as recorded in the Bible. He bravely speaks an uncomfortable truth to people in power. He faithfully puts his life into the hands of God and follows the example of Jesus in forgiving the very people who kill him.

Such knowledge, courage, faith, and forgiveness make him a GOAT, in the very best sense of the word. But Acts also teaches us that Christian GOATs are not born, they are made – made by the grace of God. Stephen may have naturally been a person "full of grace and power" (6:8), but most of us are not.

The passage we heard today is not one I think that we dwell on or think about or even want to think about and one that Christians, at least in the U.S., can relate to very well. Christians in the U.S. compared to other places in the world hardly face persecution at all, much less the threat of martyrdom. It's not much a part of the religious landscape in the U.S. and not a part of our religious reflection.

But it still may make us uncomfortable. Martyrdom holds us to an impossible standard of faith that we cannot possibly obtain without tragic results. So we go on living, trying to be faithful in every way possible, but hovering on the fringes of our consciousness is that nagging feeling that we haven't given enough because we're still breathing.

And yet, I think we do face stone-throwers who challenge our faith and threaten our Christian living. Our "stone-throwers" may not be people, but they may be situations that we encounter. Our "stone-throwers" may be external or they can be internal. We are certainly faced with a gigantic boulder right now as I suggested last week. The stones flung at us could be decisions that we face or they can be our own attitudes. I would expect that all disciples want to continue to grow in their faith and follow Jesus more closely. I would expect that we all want to respond to Jesus' question, "Are Ye Able?" with a resounding affirmative, "YES!"

But sometimes other things get in the way and we choose other priorities. Our world today offers more competition for our time than ever before. Sunday worship has become just one choice among many. Church service competes with more and more opportunities to indulge ourselves. Today, we don't even have the option of gathering at church. If you are tuned in, you are hearing this message, but if not, you aren't. It takes just as much effort or perhaps even more to "come to Church" when you don't even come to Church. We need all the encouragement we can get these days. It's hard enough to live out our faith in the best of times.

Our reading from 1 Peter seems to be talking about suffering, but underneath that is an encouragement – to keep on living our faith – at all times and in all places. 1 Peter makes a big point about *always*. In our reading this week, he continues to challenge newly baptized Christians, with the whole church, to live out the enormity of the mission before us. "Always," Peter says, "be ready to make your defense for the hope that is in you"—from day one, forward. Always. Not occasionally. Not when we feel like it. Always. And *everywhere*.

Sometimes people will hide behind the idea that it's not their job; it's the preacher's job. Stephen began his Christian career as a waiter – elected to be one of seven who were commissioned to make sure everyone got their share of food at suppertime. But, as we heard, he didn't stop there.

Every single member of the body of Christ is as much a minister as the preacher is. That's why we can celebrate virtual Communion. That's why I invited the children last week to break the bread and lift up the cup. We are all called, young or old, to be in ministry and to serve as we live out our faith. The only difference is that preachers are *professional ministers*, and most people are lay ministers. This means that we preachers get paid for doing the work of ministry, and most everyone else is a volunteer. It also means that we've got some special training that helps us to do certain things that we need for the body to function. But every member of the churches we serve possesses a special skill or some kind of special training that makes him or her critical to the function of the body too.

The folks who provide music are ministers.

The people who serve on Committees are ministers.

The people who deliver meals are ministers.

The people who make phone contacts are ministers.

The people who shovel the snow or cut the grass are ministers.

The box in our bulletin says Ministers: ALL OF US.

We are all ministers, together. We are ministers to one another and to the community around us. Each member of the body of Christ is a light shining Christ's presence in this world. Each one of you is a minister of the gospel, a minister, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ through your own individual gifts.

Peter asks us to make an accounting of our faith and hope. He calls on us to keep on doing the things that God calls us to do and has created us to do and given us the abilities and gifts to do. He didn't say it would be easy. On the contrary, he reminds us of Christ's suffering and warns us to be ready for a variety of testing and challenges. He writes to Christians who were, in fact, facing persecution, literally being tested by fire and water. Still, Christians are called to be faithful and to do good anyway. We have new opportunities, different opportunities, these days to be Jesus and show Jesus to those around us.

Peter challenges us, but we aren't expected to do it on our own. Jesus gives us an example and promises that God will send His Spirit to strengthen us and guide us and give us what we need. With God's help, we can all be GOATs.

What we need is a training program, one that can make us more knowledgeable, courageous, faithful and forgiving. We may not become the Mariano Rivera of the Christian church, but we can notch a few saves. Beginning with ourselves. What we need is a plan.

We **begin with an attitude of love**. The writer of 1 Peter begins in verse 8, before our passage today, by reminding the churches that they must reflect a "unity of spirit" by focusing on the primary virtues of the Christian life: "sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind." Unity is breaking down among many people these days. Disunity seems to be the prevailing sentiment of our world today. But the sense in Peter's Letter is that we have an opportunity to practice these virtues and model these virtues within our own communities of faith until they became habits.

Step Two: Repay evil with blessing. We can't control the attitudes and actions of others toward us, but we can control how we respond. A violent world condones revenge — that satisfaction can only be achieved when you've managed to get even with someone who has wronged you. In verses 9-14 the writer of 1 Peter echoes Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:10-12) by flipping that assumption on its ear. If you want to experience true happiness or blessedness, you need to be willing to repay evil with blessing. That's what the people of God, the followers of Christ are "called" to do.

Even among many Christians, repaying evil with good, turning the other cheek so to speak, isn't a popular notion. Yet we are called to bless those who persecute us, to endure unjust suffering if need be, but we're not called to be silent about it. We're to use those times of injustice to "make [our] defense" by speaking

powerfully and passionately for God's justice and truth. Jesus, of course, is our prime example. His words from the cross and even his silence in the face of his accusers were not passive but revealed a deep strength that was apparent even to his enemies. Our words of love and our attitude of peace in the midst of slander and persecution can speak volumes. When we choose to speak the truth in "a gentle and respectful way" we reveal the "hope" that is within us to those who "speak against you." Hearing those words of hope, those abusers may indeed be convicted and "be ashamed" by their conduct (vv. 15-16).

Step Three: Face your fears. "Now who will want to harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" asks the writer. In a perfect world that would make sense. We'd like to believe that things are fair and that people get rewarded for doing good and punished for doing evil. Reality, however, may be a different matter. People doing good are often the most tantalizing targets in a world where systemic evil works hard to keep the status quo of injustice intact.

The truth is that we do often "suffer for doing what is right" but even then, says the writer, we are "rewarded" (v. 14). "So don't worry or be afraid of their threats" is a quote from Isaiah 8:12 (NIV), where the prophet was to hold fast to his faith and not be swayed by public opinion. People often fear change, fear a loss of power and fear that which they do not understand. Rather than address those fears, they lash out at those whom they believe are a threat. Despite the ominous thought of having to endure unjust suffering at the hands of others, Christians are not to act out of fear. Rather, we're to have a healthy fear and awe of God who ultimately holds everyone in his hands. Suffering will come, but "it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil" (v. 17).

Step Four: Follow the example of Jesus. If you want to understand the proper way to live out hope in the midst of suffering, says the writer of 1 Peter, the best example is Jesus. Jesus was crucified unjustly, suffering under the worst human violence and insult one could imagine, yet his death and resurrection were the ultimate triumph of hope over injustice, sin and death. It was through that suffering that Christ was able to "bring [us] safely home to God" (v. 18).

In Christ, God had taken on the worst the world can dish out and came out the other side victorious. Followers of Jesus can expect the same. As Jesus' people, we can respond to the lingering evil of the world not by retaliating, complaining or retreating, but by proclaiming the hope, the realized hope, that is within us.

Peter addressed this issue to build up the faith of such believers. Challenge and suffering are part of being human, he argued. Whether we like it or not, we will experience pain and suffering at one time or another. It is unavoidable. On its own, suffering is useless. It adds nothing of value to our lives, but it can take a lot away from us. Yet, for Christians who persevere because of their faith, there is something to value and gain in that suffering. It is a testimony of loyalty before God's eyes. "[Christ] died for sinners," says the writer, "to bring you safely home to God" (v. 18).

This is a profound statement. It elevated the sufferer to a level comparable with Jesus, in terms of commitment and obedience. In today's vernacular you might say that the sufferer is inducted into the same hall of fame as Jesus. You might say that those who persevere become GOATs. There is no greater honor for the faithful than to be recognized by God, to hear God saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Therefore, says Peter, hang in there with confidence.

The message also says something about the cost and reward of true discipleship. We do not need to pay anything to be accepted in God's household. Christ has already accomplished that. We have already been given grace and blessings. Nothing more is needed but accepting the gift that has been given and using it for God's glory. That's how all of us can become Christian GOATs.