

How To Become Great

Acts 7:55-60

“I am the Greatest!” When you hear those words, spoken that way, if you are “of a generation,” there’s only one persona that could be: Muhammed Ali, of course. Whether he was the ultimate greatest, he was certainly among the greatest of boxers and Olympians of all time. There are simply certain people whom we all place in the various pantheons of “Greatest.”

So, who are the “Greatest’s” of the Bible? Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David, Ruth, Deborah, Isaiah, Mary, Paul, John, and Peter; no doubts there. They make up any list of the indisputable Greats. But many Greats are not as well-known. They include individuals such as Stephen, the first deacon and first martyr of the church. And we meet him in our lesson from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles this morning. His story has something to say to us about how we should prepare and live in our current crisis.

Stephen's story actually begins a couple of pages back from our lesson, when a controversy arises in the Jerusalem church. There was a perceived imbalance in the daily distribution of food to widows (6:1). The Apostles call together the whole Christian community and do what the Church has always done in the face of a crisis: they form a committee. The church selects seven of their fellowship and gives them the job of caring for those in need. These will be known as deacons. The first of them is Stephen. (v. 5).

Stephen begins to serve the Christian community and becomes known for his great faith. (v. 8) 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, on hearing this, become angry, as do the elders and the scribes. Stephen is seized and brought before the Council of Sadducees

and Pharisees, 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 questioners and accusers on a tour of the mighty acts of God, beginning with Abraham and ending with the deaths of the prophets and Jesus himself. Stephen concludes with a statement that boldly speaks 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 have they been spoken to in this way. Then they become enraged and begin to grind their teeth. (v. 56). With a shout they drag him out of the city to kill him. As they begin to stone him, and the rocks are raining down 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). Stephen becomes a martyr, the first to give his life for his faith in Jesus.

So, what is it that makes Stephen a "Greatest?" First, he knows the story of God's mighty acts, as recorded in the Bible. Second, he courageously speaks uncomfortable truth to people in power. Third, 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 "Greatest" in the best sense of that accolade.

But, here's the point: being a "Great, or even a "Greatest", isn't just for people long, long, ago and far, far, away. The Book of Acts teaches us that Christian "Greats" are not born, they are grown. Stephen was a person inclined to "grace and power" (6:8), but he wasn't born that way. No one is!

Greats are grown, not born. Again, and this is the point, with God's help you and I can all become great. What we need are some sure steps to

grow us into becoming more knowledgeable, courageous, faithful, and forgiving.

That growth begins, first, by deepening our biblical knowledge. When Stephen gives his speech to the council in Jerusalem, he makes clear that the story of God's mighty acts is a story that includes them all. He begins by saying that "the God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham" (7:2), stressing that both he and the council are part of Abraham's family, in it together. He speaks of the famine in which "our ancestors could find no food" (v. 11), talks about the time in which "our people in Egypt increased and multiplied" (v. 17), and describes Moses as the one who "received living oracles to give to us" (v. 38). The point here is that the story of the Bible is not about just ourselves, or someone else. It is about everyone; our spiritual ancestors, our faith family, and what God has done for all, including the persons we speak with. We are to know the story of Scripture as well as we know our own personal history.

To that end, make sure that you attend the Adult Forum and your children are part of Children's Chapel on Sunday mornings, where the Bible is being taught and discussed. Read the Daily Readings that are sent directly to you Monday through Friday in the Daily Devotional email. Do this, because a growing Biblical knowledge is the first step in becoming great.

Then, second, that growth builds as we courageously speak the truth to people in power. In many urban centers, Christians have for years now been deeply concerned about housing costs driving working people out of their homes. Not long back, the congregations of one particular urban center, who saw Jesus in "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40), began to work to assist the residents of a moderately priced apartment complex about to be torn down. The owner planned to replace it with luxury apartments. This would have displaced the current residents and

impoverished them by putting their employment too far away to reach.

The Congregants met with the developer, the mayor, and members of the City Council. They boldly spoke the truth to the council about the needs of working-class residents. It worked. The City Council required the developer to set aside several of the new units as affordable housing, and then provide a decent financial package for the current residents who wished to relocate.

Christ Church has been part of such efforts in the past. The current Pandemic and the growing economic crisis we are now in is sowing the seeds of potentially huge housing displacements among the poor soon to come. Our courage is going to be called upon to speak the truth to those in power, and, may I add, called upon to hear the truth when it is spoken to us when we are the powerful. Courageously speaking, and hearing, the truth is the second step in becoming great.

Now Third, growth really kicks-in when we put our lives in the hands of God and practice the forgiveness of Jesus. Stephen, even in facing death, continued to place himself in God's hands as he had in facing life, and he forgave his tormentors. Hopefully, neither you nor I will ever be called upon to die for the Faith, but we are all called upon to die to ourselves. Forgiveness is a big way we do that, and forgiveness will be called for if we as a society are to rise again together.

All of us have been wronged at some point in life. All of us have suffered from the ill will of someone or some ones at some time. Let's face it, some of them enjoyed tormenting, and would enjoy it again if they got the chance. When we forgive, we show that our trust is in a God who is stronger than injustice, stronger than evil, and stronger even than death. So, let's be clear about this. We forgive our tormentors not because they deserve it. We forgive because our lives are entrusted to the Lord of forgiveness. Forgive! That's the third step.

The “Greats” of the Bible are not born, they are grown; made by the God who empowers us by the Spirit to become knowledgeable, courageous, faithful and forgiving. That’s how to become great. So, answer your calling! God wants you – our nation needs you. May you and I become what we are called to be: the greatest followers of Jesus Christ!