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Sermon: All God Has to Work With
Text: Acts 7:55-8:1
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55 But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58 Then 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. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 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.^k 8 1 And Saul approved of their killing him.

A pretty haunting story. Certainly so for the taking of Stephen's life...an early Christian disciple, a committed servant, one of the first deacons, and also one of the first Christian martyrs. But the most haunting line in the story to me is this one: 'the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.' Other than the Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the person most responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the known world, the apostle Paul, is watching out for the coats of the mob who take out Stephen. Like the Lord who he committed to serve, Stephen calls for forgiveness upon those who take his life, while Saul stands in the shadows sanctioning Stephen's slaying and accepting responsibility for his demise.

One of the most remote and beautiful places in the world is the isle of Iona two ferry rides off the mainland of Scotland's west coast with nothing really between Iona and the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. Many centuries ago, however, when most transport and commerce and connection were made by boat rather than land masses, Iona and all the islands between Ireland, Scotland, and England, were central hubs of trade and commerce and activity. In the year 521, Columba was born in County Donegal and would later become one of the most influential Celtic saints and Christian influences. He began his life as an Irish monk and helped found monasteries in Derry, Durrow, and Kells. At the age of forty one he left Ireland and sailed to Iona and founded a monastery there. In the 20th century, Columba's abbey and grounds were rescued and the ruins rebuilt after World War II when George MacLeod founded the Iona Community which was established as a place of retreat, worship, and social engagement with the world. The abbey chapel is a beautiful house of worship, the abbey grounds are well kept with working classrooms and meeting spaces, and Columba's writing cell is still marked outside the abbey where he worked tirelessly on copying manuscripts as part of his monastic vocation. There is

even a small burial shrine commemorating Columba on the front side of the abbey as you walk into the abbey chapel.

But Iona is not a place you accidentally pass through. The only way to get there is by intention. In fact, it is said that Iona is a place from which Ireland cannot be seen. So why would someone who was so deeply connected to Ireland end up founding a monastery on a remote island far from home? Perhaps to spread the gospel, this was certainly part of Columba's mandate. Perhaps to take this way of life to new places, foreign lands, and wild and untamed territories. All possibilities. But in the history of the Celtic saints we learn that Columba had spent a good part of his life in the Irish monastery copying St. Finnian's prayer book without permission from the abbot and when he was not allowed to keep his copy and had to return it to Finnian, our image of peaceful monks living in harmony, singing chants, and praying the hours, was shattered by an all out West Side story-like brawl that ensued between the monks that supported Columba and those that supported Finnian. The aftermath was costly and led to the deaths of several monks, and we learn that Columba did not leave Ireland on account of his righteous missionary zeal or even on his own volition; as one who was held responsible for what had happened, Columba left home in disgrace. For the rest of his life, Columba spent it establishing a monastery on Iona, and introducing the clans and tribes and peoples of northern Britain to the beliefs, practices, and way of life of the Christian faith. Columba, like Paul before him, found a God who found him in his flaws, defeats, and disgrace, not to punish but to bring about God's grace, to bring about redemption, to reveal a God who takes us in our messes and mistakes and enables us to become something more.

In spite of our efforts to whitewash history or our willingness to ignore all the complications, nuances, and warts that often accompany even the most stellar of human beings, scripture is way more direct and honest with us. I mean maybe Luke was frenemy of Paul's—it's either that or he simply has no qualms portraying the future apostle to the Gentiles and missionary exemplar as the very same persecutor and murderer of Christians—one in the same person for all the world to see. He identifies him on the scene and identifies him as complicit if not responsible for the persecution and death of one of the exemplary Christians of the early church. I guess we could say, 'well, he was a new person after the Damascus road conversion, and so nothing he did before should count against him,' but why include it at all...why explicitly in our passage blame Paul for Stephen's death if being a person of faith provided him cover from his former life and actions and sins? I wonder if Luke wants us to

remember that this hero of the early church and founder of Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean, this person who later in Acts would also be stoned and persecuted himself and live to tell about it, that this same person was also flawed and full of egregious faults, a frail human being who did not always live up to his calling, who sometimes did the wrong thing, and who was not a perfect person by any means. I also wonder if Luke may be telling us that Paul became who he was, not in spite of the bad things he may have done at other points in his life, but in and through them.

In his autobiographical memoir entitled *My Losing Season*, author Pat Conroy tells the story of his senior year playing college basketball. He begins by saying ‘I thought I would be a senior on one of the greatest basketball teams in Citadel history. I could not have been more wrong. Sports books are always about winning because winning is far more pleasurable and exhilarating to read about than losing. Winning is wonderful in every aspect, but the darker music of loss resonates on deeper, richer planes....Winning makes you think you’ll always get the girl, land the job, deposit the million-dollar check, win the promotion, and you grow accustomed to a life of answered prayers. Winning shapes the soul of bad movies and novels and lives.’ On the other hand, he continues, ‘Loss is a fiercer, more uncompromising teacher, coldhearted but clear-eyed in its understanding that life is more dilemma than game, and more trial than free pass. My acquaintance with loss has sustained me during the stormy passages of my life when the pink slips came through the door, when the checks bounced at the bank, when the despair caught up with me, when my mother was dying with cancer, when my sister heard the ruthless voices inside her, when my brother took his life. Though I learned some things from the games we won that year, I learned much, much more from loss.’¹ We generally live as if God is mainly the God of the touchdown and the primary cause of the win. We never see the post-game interview with the losing athlete after a game who wants to thank the Lord for contributing to the loss, but we all know that we learn more about ourselves and God from defeats as much if not more so than victories.

Bryan Stephenson has spent his life and legal career helping exonerate death row inmates unjustly prosecuted most of whom are overwhelmingly African American. His work has been captured in the 2019 film *Just Mercy* which was based on the book by the same name. The recurring theme and mantra of *Just Mercy* is that ‘each of

¹ Pat Conroy, *My Losing Season*, 14.

us is more than the worst thing we have ever done.' We like to divide our world into good and bad people, right and wrong people, righteous and evil people, and to set ourselves as judge and arbiter of who is who and which is which. And I think we assume that God and scripture function much the same. God rewards all the good people and punishes all the bad ones. God rewards all the victors and isn't interested in any of the losses. God only chooses, cares about, and uses ideal, flawless, and model people...but what we find when we read scripture together is a God who takes flawed, listless, maybe even morally suspect human beings and uses them in spite of their worst qualities to accomplish God's purposes, enabling them to become more than the worst thing they've ever done by God's grace. As we see here in this passage, God seems to almost delight or revel in taking the enemies of today and making them into the holy of tomorrow. There is no human being too flawed and too broken that God cannot exalt, redeem, and use to reflect God's glory. That seems to be the message of scripture. And that there is no defeat, no loss, no worst thing that God cannot take and redeem and use for God's purposes and glory. Paul is the primary example here offered by Luke, but this redemptive purpose is front and center throughout scripture and defines the identity of the church. Rogues and sinners, deeply flawed and suspect people nevertheless become the very people God uses to bear and reflect his grace in this world and to offer it to others. Spectacular defeats, unceremonial deaths, lives that are barren, written off, and left for dead, in the hands of God become redeemed, useful, and capable of offering others the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course we should be happy to hear that before God we are more than our worst, more than our lowest moment, more than any of our defeats—after all, we are all God has to work with—but God's grace also demands that we see everyone else as more than their worst, more than their lowest, and more than their defeats—and sometimes that is harder. May God give us grace to see God at work in our worst, our lowest, and our defeats, and may God give us grace to see God's handiwork in the worst, in the lowest, and in the defeats of every life we encounter. Amen.