

A Community of Unstoppable Commitment

Acts 7:54-8:8

Introduction

I want to tell you two stories. These two stories are a bit disturbing. They are also true.

The first is the story of Father George, a Coptic priest in Egypt. During worship on Palm Sunday 2017 bombs exploded at two historic Coptic churches in Egypt. The bombs killed nearly fifty parishioners and injured more than one hundred others.

Just a few hours after the blast, amid outrage and grief of his parish and the world, Father George stepped before his packed church and delivered a three-point sermon to the Islamic terrorists who had perpetrated the carnage. His sermon went viral. It was titled "A Message to Those Who Kill Us." His three points were simple but not cliché: "Thank you," "We love you," and "We're praying for you."

Father George said "Thank you" because the terrorists gave the dead the honor of dying as Christ died, and because the terrorists shortened the victims' journey to their heavenly home. He also offered thanks because the terrorists made people more mindful of their eternal destinies. The church was, in fact, now overflowing with people who didn't ordinarily attend.

Then Father George said "We love you" because even murderers and thieves love those who love them, but only followers of Jesus are taught to love our enemies. Father George closed his message with "We're praying for you" because, he reasoned, if a terrorist could taste the love of God even one time, it would drive hatred from his heart.

Billy – Somalia

Story number two is about Billy. Billy lives in Somalia, which might be the most dangerous place in the world. Decades of conflict have gutted the country's infrastructure. Somalia's economy ranks dead last among all nations. It isn't a matter of IF you will experience a terrorist attack, just WHEN it will happen.

Billy was born into a religious family in Mogadishu. His father was both a tribal and religious leader who had memorized the entire Koran. Out of curiosity, Billy started studying an English Bible alongside his Koran. After three years of study, he converted to Christianity. He learned a lot from Christian radio broadcasts from neighboring countries. It was on the radio that he first heard the voice of another Somali who was a Christian.

Billy's family threatened him when he confessed his new faith in Jesus. That was when he first began to understand the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Six years after his conversion, Billy actually met his first Christian Somali. Together, as underground Christians, they found and gathered 14 believers and started an underground church. A year later, Muslims discovered the growing Christian community and started persecution in earnest.

One of their church members, Liibaan, now a famed Somali martyr, was the first to be murdered. Then a doctor who attended the church was shot to death. An educator was kidnapped and executed. A Christian man and his Muslim wife were

executed together in their bedroom. Another church member was taken off a bus and executed in broad daylight.

In all 12 of the 14 in all were murdered. None of the murderers were ever prosecuted. Today, just two members have survived out of the original church of fourteen—Billy and one other. Billy escaped many attempts on his life before moving to another country. From that base, he travels in and out of Somalia, planting and nurturing underground house churches. No longer are there only 14 Christians in Mogadishu. The church is quietly growing, partly because of the testimony of those twelve who died being persecuted for their faith.

Around the world today, more than 340 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution, just because they choose to follow Jesus. That's one out of every eight believers worldwide.

Certainly the most well-known example of this kind of persecution in the pages of the Bible is a man named Stephen. Like Philip, who we met in last week's sermon, Stephen was originally recruited by the disciples to be in the first class of deacons. He was among the seven chosen to make sure the needs of the widows in the church were met.

But, also like Philip, Stephen liked to talk about Jesus. Shortly after we meet him in Acts 6, we read:

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8)

All this resulted in Stephen's arrest on false charges – reminiscent of the same kind of charges leveled against Jesus. And, like Jesus, these charges eventually resulted in the death of Stephen.

Throughout the centuries one of the defining characteristics of the Christian church has been its willingness to withstand persecution. In fact, as you heard in the first story I told, persecution often results in growth. The church not only survives, it thrives when the forces of evil bear down on it.

That's because, as we have been emphasizing in this series, it is the church that makes hell quiver, not the other way around. The church of Jesus is and always has been a community of:

UNSTOPPABLE COMMITMENT

Let me show this UNSTOPPABLE COMMITMENT to you in the form of three contrasts in our text today:

#1: CONTRAST OF APPEARANCE

Look at verses 54-55:

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God... (Acts 7:54-55)

The sentiment expressed in the Greek says that the members of the Sanhedrin “wailed in erratic, wild, jeering shouts of anger and hostility.” Stephen’s sermon to them had “cut them to the heart” and they were convicted by what they heard.

In contrast, in the chapter before our reading for today, we read this description of Stephen as he was hauled into court:

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:15)

Gnashing teeth vs. the face of an angel.

What makes that contrast happen? Jesus explained it in the Beatitudes:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

Another verse of Scripture describes a different time when Christians were ordered into court and threatened:

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. (Acts 5:41)

As odd as it may seem, there is a joy and blessing that accompanies persecution:

- It brings joy because you know that the devil is attacking you.
- It brings joy because you know you are doing the work of Jesus
- It brings joy because you know you are on the winning side.

The second contrast that shows the UNSTOPPABLE COMMITMENT is this:

#2: CONTRAST OF ATTITUDE

I call your attention to verses 59-60:

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Acts 7:59-60)

They stoned him. Stephen prayed for them. You might have noticed how his prayers sounded a lot like two of the prayers Jesus offered from the cross.

"Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46)

St. Augustine was convinced that these prayers of Stephen were answered by the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Paul, still known as Saul in this story, on the day Stephen was killed, was standing by watching all that had happened and holding the coats of the people who wanted to throw stones. He heard Stephen pray.

We still hear stories like this in the church today. You might remember the Amish community in central Pennsylvania, for example.

As Pope John Paul II rode past a crowd in an open car in 1981, he was shot four times by Mehmet Ali Agca. The Pope was seriously wounded and nearly died. Two years later, the pope visited Agca in his prison cell for the single purpose of letting Agca know that the pope had forgiven him.

During that meeting the pope clasped Agca's hands—the same hands that had pointed a gun at him and pulled the trigger—as the two men talked. After emerging from Agca's prison cell, the pope told the media that he spoken to the man who had tried to kill him, a man he now regarded "as a brother whom I have pardoned."

The pope's unstoppable commitment resulted in a commitment to obeying the word of God.

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 5:14-15)

The final contrast that reveals the unstoppable commitment of the church is:

#3: CONTRAST OF ACTION

We read:

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. (Acts 8:1, 4)

Not even the martyrdom of Stephen could stop this community of believers from being totally committed to the Great Commission. Jesus had told them to go to the ends of the earth, and now they were there. Not silent as their persecutors had hoped, but sharing the good news despite the threats that came their way.

And even as the threats the early church continued, those Christians remained unstoppable in their commitment to share their faith. That reality continues now, 2000 years later.

A beautiful passage in Hebrews 11, the faith chapter, observes:

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. (Hebrews 11:35-38)

Those words could well be applied to many of the 340 million Christians still being persecuted around the globe today. In a nutshell their commitment remains UNSTOPPABLE.

APPLICATION

Unlike the Muslim terrorists of our day who strive to gain the attention— and fear— of the world, these followers of Jesus are not seeking to die in order to earn a place in heaven. These Christians are willing to die for their Lord. In so doing they express gratitude for having received the gift of God's salvation through Jesus and his promise to live together in a real, eternal heaven. They suffer and sometimes die with prayers of love and forgiveness on their lips. Each breath is a profession of the love of Jesus for them and for the world.

As we conclude, I want to encourage you to include in your quiet times some prayers for the persecuted church around the world. Here are four suggestions for how you might pray for them:

1. Pray that they will feel the comfort and encouragement of the Lord.
2. Pray that their persecutors will come to know Christ.
3. Pray that in the midst of persecution, the church will be strengthened and continue to grow.
4. Pray that these believers will have access to God's Word.

Let's pray for them right now... Amen.