

Picture yourself sitting at your favorite restaurant. Are you at Annie's, Casa Mia or Sunfield? The New Chalet? Maybe you're at the Lone Buffalo! Wherever you are; you're the customer asking your waiter: what's this fly doing in my soup? Your waiter looks and says; uh, looks the backstroke to me. So, you say: I thought meals here were supposed to be like mom used to make. Your waiter replies: they are. She couldn't cook either. The final straw, your salad arrives and there's a twig in it. So, you ask your waiter, "how dare you serve me this salad with a twig in it!" Your waiter replies: My apologies, I'll inform our BRANCH manager! Ok, why the bad waiter jokes? The point is: customers always blame the waiter. But, isn't the cook the real restaurant kitchen culprit. Happens all the time. The accountant catches flack for a company's poor sales. All she did was write the report. Customer service reps take the heat for their company's manufacturing failures. We're angry at a coworker so we go home and take it out on the dog or someone we love.

We all do it. It's called shooting the messenger. Unfortunately, what used to be an expression has become a very sad reality in our society. Blame and condemn the bad news bearer rather than the source. Why are we so quick to blame and condemn? Happened to Stephen. Stephen's the first recorded martyr for the cause of Jesus Christ. He was executed for his Holy Spirit driven, inclusively loving resurrection witness. Stephen's life and death repeats Jesus.' He made resurrection witness and died for it. His own Jewish people execute him because he ministers to "others." Like Jesus, he's God's good news for all people. Some thought otherwise. So, in a few short chapters of Acts, Stephen goes from waiter and witness to martyr. The waiter jokes may have been funny (or not) but Stephen's faithful courage and conviction's definitely no laughing matter. Sometime this week read Acts' first 5 chapters. Acts documents how the first Christian church grew so rapidly. The church grew because Jesus' disciples were busy multitasking. They were preaching, teaching, serving, healing and leading this new Christian community in Jesus' name.

The only problem: sectors of society, religious and the not at all religious, Jew and non-Jew are persecuting Christians. It's racial tension found and its way into the very first New Testament church in a dispute over the care of widows. Differences have always divided us. Blaming and condemning other's differences lead people to plot Stephen's demise. Instead of being admired for their work for the cause of Christ, the disciples find themselves accused of neglecting their community's hungry widows. Not wanting the cause of Christ to suffer; the disciples choose 7 waiters to set tables and serve those hungry widows. Our man Stephen's the disciple's first pick. He's an obvious candidate. He's faithfully full of God's Holy Spirit! Stephen heads the first church's very first program to feed the hungry. He's the head waiter but, between his shifts at the Disciple's Diner; Stephen takes every opportunity to serve up several temple truths. He bravely exposes the community's rifts and tiffs. He's God's good news messenger. You need to know Stephen's not pitting Christians against Jews as though they were two distinct religions.

The debate's an intra-Jewish struggle over the continuing role of Jewish Temple and Law. Christianity was redefining what had always been. The church's very first time to hear the church's very last and most deadly seven words: "we've never done it this way before." Like Jesus, Stephen doesn't see differences. His version of Jewish history includes only two Jewish

groups: those who accept God’s message and messengers and those who reject it. Luke seems to want us to know that rather than rejecting God’s house or God’s law, followers of the Jesus Way are in line with faithful Jews who keep God’s covenant. No different today; then the disagreements were between Jews and Christians, Jews and Gentiles (non-jews) and Greeks and Hebrew Jews. And, isn’t it true today? Disagreements abound in all sectors of our very polarized society right, center and left; and right center and left center, too. So, who’s being stoned today? What’s being stoned to death today is the sense of community. We only heard bookends of Stephen’s story, but he’s stoned to death by faithful people from his own, religious community. Like Jesus, Stephen got blamed and condemned for suggesting a new way.

Who knew serving others and speaking up for Jesus could be so unpopular if not dangerous? We live in the difficult reality of blaming and condemning differences now; but why was it so difficult then? You need to know: then, there was no distinction between Christian and Jew. Christians gathered in homes to continue the Jesus’ way, truth and life. Christians then didn’t meet in churches like us. They also worshipped and lived as devout Jews. Hebrew Jerusalem Jews considered Hellenistic Greek speaking Jewish Christians like Stephen outsiders. Christians welcomed outsider Greek Jews into the fold even made them leaders, like Stephen! Most Hebrew Jews from Jerusalem spoke Aramaic so they actively resisted any Greek influence. It’s a Greek fly the Greek speaking Christian Jews served in the soup of outsider Greek-speaking Jewish widows. Everyone’s all sorts of uneasy about it. Essentially Stephen and 6 others are commissioned to this very important feeding ministry. They minister to outsiders, not just any outsiders, but, outsider Greek widow women because Greek widow women were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. We’d NEVER discriminate! We’d never exclude! Stephen’s a healthy, holy communicator, driven by God’s Spirit. He speaks the truth. He exposes the difficulty and division in the temple. We didn’t hear it today but Luke records Stephen’s incredible sermon. Stephen openly criticizes Old Testament Jewish laws for their concern about maintaining all the religious rules and regulations to the detriment of their relationships.

Stephen’s a recognized Christian leader. He’s full of God’s Spirit. He eloquently reminds the Jews how God’s Spirit led them through a powerful wilderness journey of faith only asking them to follow. Stephen asks them to think about all the ways God’s Spirit constantly moved them out of their comfort zone to follow God, even when all seemed strange and foreign. Stephen openly shared his frustration with the old ways! Because he was excited about this new more inclusive way! He sees how God’s leading them forward into the future with new expressions of faith—new expressions that invited and included everyone even outsider widow women. Hebrew or Greek Jew, Christian or Gentile. No distinctions! No divisions. He knows his Jewish Christian community can only be healed, restored and made whole in Christ! A life in Christ always results in a resurrection healing. Resurrection healings make everything old new again. I wonder? Will there be a new expression of Methodism in all our divisive differences? Stephen wasn’t afraid to speak the resurrection reality of God doing some new thing. Just happened to differ from other’s reality at that time. And, isn’t it true? We all have our own version of what we think is reality and then there’s the Gospel truth. The good news. God’s good news is this: in a true Christian community no one is outside of God’s grace.

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Salvation is for all. That's Stephen's stance. He made a case for the inclusive ways of Jesus Christ right in the middle of the temple. Only problem: angry worshippers didn't like what he was dishing out. Guess they weren't ready to taste and see the goodness of Jesus, God's new way. But to get so angry they stoned him to death?

Wow, what kind of Christian community could allow relationships to deteriorate so badly? How could differing opinions result in severed relationships, violence, and even death? It's not very often we look to the scriptures for what NOT to do. Today's a cautionary tale of what happens to any community that's intent on preserving divisions and protecting the status quo! God's Holy Spirit moves Stephen in a new way! By the power of God's Holy Spirit, Stephen ministered to outsiders. He saw Jesus standing at his side in all his glory. And it all ends really poorly. A violent death. Whether we look back in history or consider our own experiences we know: speaking the truth of God's salvation for all's not always popular. But to stone someone to death for suggesting some new thing? Happens when the community's divided by hatred, pain, betrayal, and disagreement. The division paralyzes God's active resurrection healing work. They refused to change. They resisted God's Spirit. They couldn't accept their differences and it all separated them from God's healing Spirit and each other. Living in Christ heals relationships. Intentional living in Christ is a resurrection healing that brings some new thing, some fresh expression of faith, healing and renewal. It's why we used to say: "the more the merrier and two heads or more are always better than one."

Notice how that's all changed. Now it's the more who think like us the merrier and let's find others who think like me and form an exclusive alliance. And, it's destroying our communities. My friends, we need a resurrection healing! Something has to end so some new thing can begin! What needs to end? Blaming and condemning! Resurrection healing happens when everyone actively embraces differences. Resurrection healing happens when we actively listen to each other. Resurrection healing happens when we actively love everyone! Without exclusions! Then and only then will resurrection healing happen. It's the Jesus way. A true Christian community, a community that sets aside individual differences to actively pursue a resurrection healing. So, today's question is: can we be people who live together in Christ? Can we set aside our individual differences and commit to actively pursuing a resurrection healing? Can we be living, serving, studying and praying together until we understand our differences, until anyone who feels excluded is healed and the group is made whole again in Christ? No more stones! Only a resurrection healing that allows God's holy, loving spirit to work in our differences to bring about some new thing. Do you believe a resurrection healing is possible? In the United Methodist Church? Could we invest our efforts in creating a community where we practice resurrection healing? Why? Because all healing is of God. God makes all things possible. It's not magic. It's the greatest mystery of God's inclusive love. It's hard work, so hard Stephen got stoned to death for it. It's hard listening to learn. It's hard to seek to understand. It's hard to love sacrificially and unconditionally. It's hard entering the difficulty and opening ourselves to God's healing Spirit. Let's let nothing separate us from each other but most importantly from God. Both Stephen and Jesus' life and death remind us that God doesn't promise we'll be spared the suffering but we also know God promises to be with us through the suffering if we just persist and follow God's Spirit. Our death is inevitable but

before our time comes let's live healed and whole in Jesus Christ, God's unending peace and love. We never want to be a community that allows rifts and tifts that led to Stephen's stoning. Now more than ever we desperately need God's healing, a resurrection healing in our lives and in the life of the church. So, how do we practice this resurrection healing? It's certainly not by assuming we all share the same opinions. That'll never happen and it shouldn't. Part of being open to the work of God's Spirit is not just recognizing our differences but embracing them. God intentionally gifted us all differently. Healing happens when we listen to our differences and consider everyone's ideas allowing God's Holy Spirit to work in us.

Stephen was killed by a community focused on rules and regulations, not on relationships. Stephen spoke the possibility of a new and renewing, healing Spirit of God. It's my prayer that our worship, our service, our study, everything we do creates a space for God's Holy Spirit to work so healing can happen. That's why we'll soon be organizing small groups. Listening and learning small groups. Listening and learning from one another. If we all commit to listening and learning; could we experience a resurrection healing? A way forward that agrees to disagree and yet preserves the unity in this community. Some of us are uncomfortable with the whole idea. Some say why, just move on. Some are ambivalent. Some are wanting things to change. Others say keep things just the way they are. Others yearn for a safe place to explore their feelings. My friends, we can know God's resurrection healing in this community! Let's take bold steps forward. Let's not oppose the work of God's Spirit but boldly walking into the difficult places God leads us. Let's go with God. God will lead us forward into the future God hopes to see. And, isn't it true? We all need God's healing in our lives. Why if we allowed God to look into the eyes of our soul we'd realize none of us here this morning is healed, whole and perfect. Each of us has our own brokenness; pain, or difficulty that separates us from God. Maybe we've allowed something from our past to come between us and God. Or, we've wandered away from God. Maybe we've become a person we don't want to be let alone the person God wants us to be. Maybe we need to forgive someone or ask someone's forgiveness. Hopefully that difficulty's not festered so much we no longer hear God's still small voice. Maybe we're concerned about our health? Or, our grief and sadness over the loss of a loved one's so intense God feels absent. Maybe we have anxiety about our future or our finances everything feels so uncertain?

My friends, prayerfully consider your response to today's opportunity. You have the opportunity to come to forward. And, just like the first church anointed those who needed healing; we have the opportunity to be anointed by the Holy Water of God's Healing, Holy Spirit. When the music begins, I'll be at the front to receive you. What needs healing in your life? What needs healing in this church? I invite you to come forward. I'll make the sign of the cross on your forehead. Hear God's invitation! Be anointed. God meet us whenever we open ourselves to the mystery of God's miraculous healing touch.