

# Rough Road

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Acts 7:55-60

John 14:1-14

Philip Ruge-Jones writes at Working Preacher, “Back in the day, my seminary professors told us that our proclamation should recreate the effect in our own congregation that the Word had on its first hearers.” He goes on to suggest that the most faithful result of a sermon on the death of Stephen would be, in fact, that you do to me what Stephen’s audience did to him.

I’m pretty sure Dr. Ruge-Jones was joking.

You may be wondering why Stephen was executed at all. Who was he? Who were the people who covered their ears and with a loud shout rushed together against him?

Stephen was one of the first seven deacons, a position created in the Jerusalem church to distribute food among its members. That congregation had committed itself to sharing resources, and that meant that they purchased for everyone and then had to deliver it to everyone. Originally the apostles did all that work, but with the growth of the church and their desire to concentrate on speaking to new potential members, they expanded the leadership group and created this new role. The name “diakonos” (which we’ve rendered to “deacon” in English) was the word used for a table servant.

Stephen, at least, and one assumes his compatriots, didn’t just deliver food. He became well known for his words and “great wonders and signs.” This roused some in the city to formally charge him with blasphemy before the council of the Temple priests. His reply to their accusations was... Well, Stephen accused those sitting in judgment of participating in the murder of God’s prophets. “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

Stephen found himself on a portion of his faith journey that had turned into a rough road. Up to this point, though the Jerusalem authorities had been concerned about the growing movement of Jesus-followers, they had restrained themselves from major actions, lest they find themselves opposing something inspired by God. With Stephen before them, the mood had changed. It’s worth asking whether Stephen could have expected anything else but a death sentence from them. Luke’s writing suggests, I think, that Stephen’s own words inflamed their hostility so much that they abandoned the judicial proceedings and degenerated into a mob.

Jesus, before a court that probably included a fair number of the same people, had not been judged guilty of blasphemy, but brought to the Roman governor for trial as a rebel.

You can read this as Stephen deliberately – or at least foolishly – aggravating his judges to the point they would act against his life. Did Stephen have a death wish? Is that likely to be true of the Christian martyrs who adopted Stephen as the model for their conduct before court after court for the next two and a half centuries? I don't think so.

What I see in the stories of Christian martyrs is a common theme of a line they would not cross, an action they would not take, a word they would not say, or a statement they would not disavow. They didn't all share the same line, though many shared one, refusing to recant their faith during the centuries of intermittent Roman persecution. Others refused to wed non-Christians and died for it. Others refused to kill, and died for it.

It's worth asking: what is the line you won't cross? What is the truth you will not unsay? What is the falsehood you will not speak, though your life depends on it?

Keep in mind that that may never be tested, and please God it never is. Keep in mind as well that you may not know what it is until it is tested. I am quite sure that if you'd asked Dietrich Bonhoeffer if he'd die for the principle that the Church has to maintain its truth against the dictates of national power, he'd have said, "Perhaps, but that will never happen." But it did happen.

Where is your line? What is your truth? What will you refuse to do though your life depend on it?

Amy Oden writes at Working Preacher, "The prophetic gaze does not shy away from injustice, or gloss over transgression. The prophetic gaze does not avoid the painful truth. However, its eye is NOT focused on the transgressors. This may be counterintuitive for many contemporary Christians.

"Whereas so much of our own prophetic speech today is focused on 'them,' whoever the political or theological opponents are, Stephen's prophetic gaze is not on the transgressors. Rather, Stephen's prophetic eye is on 'the heavens' or, we might say, 'the kin-dom' or 'the reign of God' or 'God's life here and now.'"

Where is God's line? Where is God's truth? What will you refuse to do because your relationship with God depends on it?

Stephen had seen the suffering of the people of Jerusalem. His first task was to see that people could eat – when you have that job, you'll meet a lot of desperately hungry people. He knew their rough road.

His determination to bear witness to their suffering and their hope set him on a rough road of his own – arrest, trial, and execution.

At the last, he glimpsed a vision of the rough road's destination, and held to his truth, praying that God forgive his executioners and committing his spirit to Jesus as Jesus had committed his spirit to God.

May God keep you from rough roads, but if you find yourself upon one, may you follow it with courage, faith, greatness of heart, and a vision of the comfort at the road's end.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*