

Alderwood Community Church
January 31, 2010

When God taps you on the shoulder

Acts 6:8-15

Intro: How do you respond when God taps you on the shoulder? When he has an assignment for you? Scripture records all kinds of responses to God's nudging. Samuel responded to God in the middle of the night and responded, "Speak for your servant is listening", Jonah ran away, Moses made excuses about not being able to speak in front of others, Gideon lacked faith and demanded miraculous signs and Esther replied "If I perish, I perish".

In our passage this morning we get a glimpse of the man Stephen, whom God tapped on the shoulder for an important assignment.

Context: Acts 6:1-7 The issue was more, however, than one of cultural tension between the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews. The apostles discerned a deeper problem, namely that social administration (both organizing the distribution of food for the widows and settling the complaint) was threatening to occupy all their time and so inhibit them from the work which Christ had specifically entrusted to them, namely preaching and teaching.

A vital principle is illustrated in this incident, which is of urgent importance to the church today. It is that God calls all his people to ministry, that he calls different people to different ministries, and that those called to 'prayer and the ministry of the word' must on no account allow themselves to be distracted from their priorities.

It is surely deliberate that the work of the Twelve and the work of the Seven are alike called *diakonia* (1, 4), 'ministry' or 'service'. The former is 'the ministry of the word' (4) or pastoral work, the latter 'the ministry of tables' (2) or social work. Neither ministry is superior to the other. On the contrary, both are Christian ministries, that is, ways of serving God and his people. Both require spiritual people, 'full of the Spirit', to exercise them. And both can be full-time Christian ministries. The only difference between them lies in the form the ministry takes, requiring different gifts and different callings.

"But to each one of us grace has been given according to the measure of Christ's gift...And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." Ephesians 4:7, 11-12 (NASB)

Stephen was a key figure in the early history of the church. But apart from his historical role, he was significant because of his character. He was proof that the impact of a man's life and ministry has nothing necessarily to do with length. His ministry, though brief, was essential to God's plan for world evangelism. He showed that the efforts of one courageous person, though of short duration, can have far-reaching effects.

"For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." 2 Chronicles 16:9

What is God looking for? (*Those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*)

Read: Acts 6:8-15 (pg. 1,083)

What kind of person does God tap on the shoulder?

1. A man or woman who is available. (6:8)

God is looking for a person who is available and yielded to him. Those who see their lives, as not their own. Those who understand that God is sovereign. Those whose agenda is that of a higher purpose. Those who are not too busy or preoccupied with their own agenda.

You can't fill a full cup. We are to empty ourselves of ourselves in order for God to fill us.

2. A man or woman of character. (6:3,5,8)

A. Full of the Holy Spirit

That is the privilege of every believer (Eph. 5:18). To be full of faith is to trust God; to be filled with the Spirit is to obey fully His will. Stephen believed God and submitted to the leading of the empowering, purifying Holy Spirit.

B. Full of wisdom

To be full of wisdom is to have biblical knowledge, and the practical wisdom to apply biblical truth to the situations of everyday life.

C. Full of faith

His sermon before the Sanhedrin reveals the content of his faith. He believed that God ruled history (7:1–51), and was confident of God's sovereign control of his life. He could say with Paul, "If we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8).

D. Full of grace

Full of grace indicates a gracious, Christ-like character. Stephen was given the grace to face persecution, even death. Neither fear nor hatred controlled him, only trust and submission. He could be gracious even at the point of death because of his confident trust in God and resignation to the divine purpose. Having committed himself fully into God's hands (7:59), he was willing to endure anything in the strength of enabling grace. God's grace also flowed out of his life to others. Perhaps that was one reason the church chose him to minister to widows. Stephen was even gracious toward his executioners, praying for their forgiveness as their stones crushed out his life (7:60)

E. Full of power

That was a direct result of his being filled with the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8). That he **was performing great wonders and signs among the people** suggests he was far more than simply a deacon. Instead, his deeds of power show his close link with the apostles. In the New Testament church only the apostles, Stephen, Philip (Acts 8:6–7), and Barnabas (15:12) performed miracles.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” Ephesians 3:20 His power is at work in all of us. It may be different than in Stephen or me or the person next to you, but God’s power is at work in those who are full of the Holy Spirit.

3. A man or woman of courage (6:9-14) Serving in the face of opposition.

Vrs. 9 Synagogues were meeting places where the Jewish community assembled to read the Scriptures and worship. They originated as far back as the Babylonian Captivity, when the exiles were cut off from access to the temple. According to the Talmud, there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem at this time, although that figure may be exaggerated. Many synagogues, like the one mentioned here, consisted of Hellenistic Jews. It is possible that Stephen was a member of one of these synagogues.

The Freedmen were freed slaves and their descendents. They were later granted their freedom and formed a Jewish community there. But who were the Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia? Some think that they composed four distinct synagogues, with the freedmen making a fifth. Others think two, three or four synagogues are in mind. But perhaps it is best to understand with the NIV that Luke is referring to only one synagogue (for the word is in the singular) ‘comprising’ people from the four places mentioned. Because they had been freed from slavery, they must have been foreign Jews who had now come to live in Jerusalem. Perhaps those from Cilicia even included Saul of Tarsus.

These men began to argue with Stephen. “Argue” here refers not to a quarrel but to a formal debate. Luke does not give us the content of the debate. Some of Stephen’s arguments can be inferred from the charges brought against him (6:13–14) and his speech before the Sanhedrin. The debate no doubt centered on the death, resurrection, and Messiahship of Jesus, and how Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the temple.

Vrs. 10 Whatever the precise issues of the debate were, his opponents “*could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.*” Their human reasoning was no match for Stephen’s God-given wisdom.

Vrs. 11 Unable to defeat Stephen in a fair debate, his opponents changed tactics. They recruited (and probably bribed) and coached false witnesses to accuse Stephen, the same tactic used at Jesus’ trial (Matt. 26:59–61). Even the trumped-up charges of blasphemy were like those against his Lord. Thus the opposition degenerated from theology through slander to violence.

The false witnesses accused Stephen of speaking “*words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.*” Such was their zeal for the law that they mentioned Moses before God. Blasphemy, speaking evil of something God deems sacred, such as the law of Moses, the person of God, or His temple, was a very serious crime, punishable by death (Lev. 24:16).

Vrs. 12 Since the people were fanatically zealous for Moses and God, they were easily *stirred up* by the false charges. Along with the elders and the scribes (Some of whom were likely members of the Sanhedrin) the mob came upon Stephen and *seized Stephen (by force)* dragged him away for trial before the Sanhedrin.

Vrs. 14 *We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses handed down to us.* The phrase *this Jesus of Nazareth* expresses their contempt for Jesus, since they believed nothing good could come from Nazareth (John 1:46). Jesus had never claimed He would destroy the Jerusalem temple. He said to His adversaries, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). As John 2:21 makes clear, “He was speaking of the temple of His body.” Since that false accusation had succeeded in getting Jesus condemned, they were quick to use it against Stephen.

Throughout this ordeal, Stephen’s courage shines through. Despite the intense opposition he encountered, he never backed down or compromised. As his enemies complained, he boldly proclaimed the gospel message. Even while on trial for his life before the Sanhedrin, his courage did not waver. In Acts 7:51–53 he boldly rebuked them in the following words:

You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.

Stephen had significant impact because of his character. His fearless, selfless proclamation led him to pay the ultimate price for his commitment. He is proof that the impact of a man’s life and ministry has nothing necessarily to do with length. Yet he did not die before fulfilling the mission God laid out for him. Ephesians 2:10 “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.*”

4. God will use and affirm a man or woman like this! (6:15)

It is significant that the Sanhedrin should see Stephen’s face shining like an angel’s, for this is exactly what happened to Moses’ face when he came down from Mount Sinai with the law. Was it not God’s deliberate purpose to give the same radiant face to Stephen when he was accused of opposing the law as he had given to Moses when he received the law? In this way God was showing that both Moses’ ministry of the law and Stephen’s interpretation of it had his affirmation.

Stephen proved to be a man who was available to God, a man of character and courage. As a result God used his life and his death to have a profound influence over a man named Saul who would later play a huge part in establishing and expanding the church. God also used Stephen’s death to thrust the church out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and the rest of the world.

Conclusion: Is God tapping you on the shoulder? What is it he is asking you to do?

(List upcoming ministry needs in our church: 3rd Service- children's workers, ushers, greeters, small group leaders, homes available for small groups,)

We have no idea the extent and the way God will use us. Stephen had no idea he would be stoned to death and become the first martyr of the Christian Church- and therefore be an instrument to launch the church into the world. (8:1)

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” Ephesians 3:20-21