

COOL FAITH

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Acts 6:1-15, 7:54-60

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Several years ago, I read a newspaper article about “hot” and “cold” emotional states, and the enormous gulf that separates the two states. Those caught up in an angry and impassioned “hot” state, do not tend to be at all sympathetic with those who do not think and feel the way they do. And those in a cold emotional state who are cool, calm and collected, find it very difficult to empathize with those caught up in a hot and bothered state. When in a cool state, it’s easy to think, “those people are nuts” or “I’d never do something so crazy.” Of course, we probably all need to watch out, because behaving a bit crazy is probably not outside the realm of possibility for any one of us.

In today’s lesson from Acts, we find ourselves in Jerusalem and face to face with a group of burning hot Jewish leaders. Their hot emotional state is directed towards a Christian by the name of Stephen. Stephen was one of seven men chosen by the early church to make sure the poor and widows of the city were not neglected. As Stephen busied himself caring for the less fortunate, he obviously said some things in public that others did not like. As a result, he was brought before a council of Jewish leaders on the charge of blasphemy – the very same charge that was brought against Jesus. This council is not the formal Sanhedrin. We know, of course, the Sanhedrin had no authority to execute anyone, and that is why they turned Jesus over to the Roman authorities. However, this group that Stephen is brought before appears to be more like a local lynch mob than any formal, legitimate authority.

Throughout the entire inquisition, Stephen is cool, calm and collected. He is coherent and confident in what he believes and who is truly in charge. But on the other side is a group of people who are getting hotter and hotter. As Stephen finishes up his long discourse on the history of Israel (Acts 7:2-53) and his condemnation of those gathered, the group reaches its boiling point. Acts tells us that “When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.” (Acts 7:54). Obviously, their anger was threatening and very visible. Stephen then gazes up, “Look,” he says, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:55-56)

At this point the boiling pot boils over as those gathered cover their ears and with a loud shout rush against Stephen. They drag him out of the city and taking the law into their own hands they begin stoning him to death. We learn that one of the people in the crowd that day was a young man by the name of Saul – a man who will eventually encounter the living Christ and convert to Christianity, but not on that day. As the angered stoning continues, we once again hear Stephen’s voice and this time he is praying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 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.” (Acts 7:59-60) It was hot, angry faith resulted in the brutal murder of a compassionate and devoted Christian named Stephen, “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 6:5)

Hot faith – we might hear people praising it as they say it is good to be passionate about what you believe. After all, no one respects a person who is simply “lukewarm” about faith. And it certainly wouldn’t be a compliment to say something like, “That guy is ice-cold for Jesus!” And yet, hot faith has been and continues to be a violent and deadly force in the world.

Sunnis continue to fight Shiites in places like Iraq. Hindus continue to battle Muslims in places like India. Jews and Muslims continue to face off in Palestine. Christian churches are bombed in Sri Lanka on Easter. And here in the United States, we are regularly confronted in the news by hot, violent acts not only between those of different religious affiliation, but also between those of the same faith, but belonging to a different political party or having a different life perspective. Outspoken atheist have gone so far as to say that religion in general is the cause of most of the world's troubles. Looking at our world and its history, it's hard to argue against such an opinion, because unfortunately, a great amount of evil has been done in the name of God.

But the important thing to remember is that the alternative to the anger and violence of hot faith is not "no faith," but "real faith" – today, I'm using the term "cool faith." This cool faith is not hip or popular in the way that the Fonz was cool on that 1974-84 series, "Happy Days." This cool faith has nothing to do with the room temperature and whether you are feeling chilly. This cool faith is actually a passionate faith, but not in the way we sometimes think of passion. Today, I hold up Stephen as our example of how passionate and cool fit together when it comes to a living faith after the example of Jesus.

As we look at Stephen's example, we see that cool faith is about having a deep and abiding trust not in ourselves and in our own understanding, but in God. Stephen declares to the crowd, "Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands." (Acts 7:48) In other words, far too often we worship a god of our own making, but God does not live in the moral, theological, social houses that we build. God's throne is God's, not ours. A cool faith realizes that nothing in our finite world can contain an infinite God – not our nations, not our political parties, not our religions, not our churches, and certainly not our personal agendas. When Stephen gazes into heaven and sees both the glory of God and Jesus, it is ever so clear that God is far from the anger and wrath of that hot Jerusalem crowd.

We also see in Stephen's example that cool faith is sacrificial. Stephen follows in the footsteps of Jesus. As the rocks begin to fly, Stephen simply prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59) This willing sacrifice is a tough one for us, because not only are we taught to fight for what we want and believe, we are also told we deserve to "have it all." And yet, being a good parent, a good spouse, a good friend, a good human being means sacrificing something of ourselves for the benefit of another. To be a good Christian at school means sacrificing some of our popularity to live after the example of Christ. To be a good church member means offering time and talent and money to advance the mission of Christ's church. None of this is easy, sometimes it's even painful, but it's all a part of what it mean to be a follower of the One who gave his life on a cross.

Finally, we see in Stephen's example that cool faith is forgiving. Stephen's very last words are, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60) These words echo Jesus' prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) This forgiving of those who do us harm may be the biggest challenge of all, and yet Jesus clearly showed us that this forgiveness is at the heart of God.

In a world, a community, a family that is being ripped apart daily by anger and violence, the story of Stephen is held before us today. It is a story of one man's cool faith standing strong and refusing to be caught up in the hot and dangerous, and sinful emotions of the moment. Stephen placed his complete trust in God as he endured the difficult pathway of sacrifice and forgiveness. He refused to compromise

what he knew to be true, and because of that he became a powerful and unforgettable witness for Jesus Christ. With a similar passion, let us dare to embrace and exemplify a life of faith that is grounded in trusting God, and is lived out through our personal commitment to both sacrifice and forgive.

As we come now to a time of Holy Communion, come as those both convicted by and saved through the trusting, sacrificial and forgiving example of Jesus Christ. Come as those who even though we may falter and fail, still desire to embrace and live in a state of cool faith. If you seek to follow Christ, know that you are invited and welcome at this table (you need not be a member of this church). Let us prepare ourselves to meet our Risen Lord as we first enter into a time of confession...