

6 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews[a] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.

2 To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me!

51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Dandelions: Love them or hate them. Grandpa loved them and wanted a field full of them. Grandma would walk us through the forest and show us how we could eat their leaves, drink the nectar from their stem, and tell us how good they were for the bees. They were our favorite flower and quite possibly the only flower we gave to mom on mother’s day (which is next week so don’t forget and if you do we’ll try to have cards in the men’s bathroom.) We loved spreading the seeds, those little bundles of joy everywhere.

But if you’re not my grandpa or me. You probably don’t like the little buggers popping up in the middle of your lawn. They are stubborn to remove, grow rapidly, and don’t care if the soil type is a crack in the concrete they will take root, grow, and reseed themselves. Which also happens to be a lot like the Christian church. They too are stubborn to uproot and difficult to destroy.

But why? It's Good Shepherd Sunday and Jesus is good not because he occasionally loses a sheep. But he guards and protects his people. He continues to plant the seed of his word into hard hearts and the good news finds a crack in even in concrete and finds a way. But not everyone loves Dandelions. Not everyone loves Christians either.

While some would question why God would allow such suffering to come upon Christians as some try to remove them from this world. We don't know why God would allow bad things to happen. We do know that we have a Good Shepherd, who cares for us, who spreads the seed of his word so it may take root - and the harder you stomp the further the seed spreads just like a dandelion.

Christianity took root in Jerusalem. After that first flower died thousands of seeds took flight and spread everywhere. Pentecost came and 3,000 were added to their number that day. The soil was rich. The religious leaders started off with a simple treatment of stomping on the first flower. When that doesn't work they ratchet up their efforts. They speak sternly to Peter and John they are flogged and released. When that won't work they go for the Round Up approach. The apostles are rounded up and imprisoned but an angel let's them out. Nothing can stop them. They find one victory after another.

But as the church grows problems from within emerge. The people begin to grumble. The Greek Grannies are being neglected in the dispersion of food. The apostles took act to stop the spread of another weed - grumbling. They listened to the complaint and then did something about it. But it *wouldn't be right for the apostles to neglect the preaching of the Word to wait on tables*. Did you notice what they did? They used their own people to solve the problem. The Greek men oversaw the dispersion of the food. These are greek names. They hear the complaint. They own up to the problem and then allow those closest to the problem to deal with it. The ministry is allowed to change to meet the needs of the people. All cylinders are firing. We are introduced to a new team of leaders. They are respected. They knew their bible. They are bold in their public preaching. Christianity spread and grew. A large number of priests were added to their number.

The first character we find is Stephen, who is described as *a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people*. But he doesn't look so powerful. He is seized and brought before the Sanhedrin under charges of blasphemy but that doesn't stop him from trying to find a crack to plant the seed of God's Word. But they didn't want to hear it. "Stiff-necked. Their hearts and ears were uncircumcised. Just like their fathers. They resist the Holy Spirit. Killed the righteous one." unlike Peter's Pentecost sermon they are not cut to the heart. They were filled with fury and gnashed their teeth at him. They covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices they dragged him out of the city and stoned him. *On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem*. Trying to stomp out the dandelions.

Christianity took root and spread to the states finding one victory after another. But with growth comes grumbling. That's just how it is: more people more needs and someone is overlooked. The pastor forgets and needs aren't met or maybe pastor is just completely oblivious to a situation and the grumbling begins. Where grumbling can go from bad to worse depends on to whom people grumble and complain. Sometimes we don't want a solution we just want to complain. So instead of going to the one who can resolve problem everyone else finds out. They don't realized how destructive this can be.

Then again sometimes we grumble without wanting to be a part of the solution. We should do this... Make it so. But such a solution fails to recall that the people serve as solutions to the problems.

Those closest to the problem deal with it and yes sometimes changes should be made, new ministries can and should be formed. Because even the apostles couldn't do it all by themselves. *It wouldn't be right for us to neglect the Word of God to wait on tables.* But at times even I waste a lot of time with anything else than the one thing needful. Then when Sunday rolls around, I am unprepared to give people the best that is in me. Then people get the impression that the pastor is up her because he has to. Pastors aren't the only one to neglect the Word of God. It also happens among us when we place anything as of more importance than the Word. No you don't have to be here every Sunday. You don't have to eat every day of the week either but it is a good idea.

We've heard that before. Maybe he's not exciting enough and maybe we just want to be on a winning team. You realize we are just like our fathers and that should cut us to the heart. Not fill us with fury and cause us to close our ears. Listen to what God has to say.

Word of God won't always be a popular but it is what we need to hear. The only sad part was that Stephen never had a chance to announce the forgiveness freely won for them. Instead they cover their ears and yelling remove him from the city for the sake of stoning him. Stephen serves as a bridge into Acts part: II. This is how Christianity spread from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. It triggered a larger persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

It took Christians out of Jerusalem to all of Judea and Samari. God fulfilled the Great Commission as the gospel spread abroad and Christians carried the seed of the word with the winds of persecution. What Stephen starts is finished by Paul. Maybe that's because a seed was sown at the stoning of Stephen. They *laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.* Saul has just seen Stephen witness through his words and actions.

Stephen died like Jesus did, Confessing the faith. Jesus called out, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* - Luke 23:46. Stephen prayed, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"* - Acts 7:59. Both asked God to pardon those who killed them. But there are differences. Jesus was sinless Son of God. Stephen was not. Jesus died for the sins of the world. Stephen died for his own sins. Jesus was forsaken by God crying out, *"My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?"* While Stephen was able to look up to the heavens and see Jesus standing at the right hand of God with welcoming arms.

Jesus vindicates Stephen from the charges of those who kill him for blasphemy. Jesus is in his glory seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty from there he will come to judge. When Jesus stands as judge he serves as an advocate on behalf of Stephen. Jesus is alive and at work. Standing to welcome and receive Stephen and his testimony. *Well done, good and faithful servant.* While another flower dies the seeds spread everywhere.

Persecution may move us out of our comfort zone. We may flee to another part of the country. No matter where we go we carry with us the Word of God. And even those who stay behind spread the Word of God. Jesus spreads those seeds everywhere. Even among us. As he reminds us we are forgiven for our every failure to spend time in his word. Or those times we've shut our ears and ignored his word for our lives. Jesus still finds a way to get through. You probably won't ever have a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father in heaven. You may not see the heavens opened. But God has promised to speak to us through His Word and Sacraments

Do not lose sight of your mission. Keep the Word central and then realize that working within the church doesn't mean we fail to engage those outside with the gospel. It provides more opportunities. Life won't always be easy. Life won't always feel like we are on the winning team. Remember that even the disciples had set backs and we will too.

But no matter what happens to us. Jesus still vindicates us and all of Christianity. He stands to welcome and receive us and our witness about him. You can't kill Christianity. It takes root wherever the seeds fall. You won't always see the results of your work. Like Stephen you might be long dead before you find out Saul has suddenly swapped teams and started fighting for the Christianity he tried to stomp out. Jesus had a hand in that too. But no matter what happens. No matter how hard the world stomps the Word still spreads. Our Good Shepherd still guides us, safely home to him. We have his promise, '*Nothing can snatch them out of my hand* (John 10:35). No matter what this world throws at you, no matter how much you suffer the affects of sin, you are safe.

You may not like dandelions. It's okay. We can stop them. But Christianity will take root, find a way, not because we are such faithful stewards of the Word but because of the one who has promised to Work through that word to strengthen, guide, and preserve us until the end. We have a Good Shepherd. And he remains the Good Shepherd even if he is a mediocre gardener who allows dandelions to grow and take root. Their growth doesn't depend on soil type but only on our gracious Good Shepherd who sows that seed everywhere, even among us. Amen.