

For a link to Dr. Skinner's video on this lesson [click here](#)

Stephen Read Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60

Skinner notes that “Stephen is hardly a character ‘around the edges.’” The church remembers Stephen as the first Christian martyr and Acts assigns him the longest speech in the book (if you are interested you can read Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2-53). We first meet Stephen at the beginning of chapter 6 where he is one of the seven men chosen to help distribute food to the widows (6:5). We next learn that Stephen has performed “great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8). For reasons Acts does not make clear, Stephen earns the ire of the Jerusalem authorities and charges are brought against him (he is charged with being against the Temple and the Mosaic Law). Stephen defends himself, but the council becomes enraged at his words and things get out of control. A mob forms and they stone Stephen.

- Scholars have long noted similarities between Jesus' trial and crucifixion and Stephen's trial and crucifixion. What similarities do you notice? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story of Stephen's death in this way?

As mentioned above, Stephen is remembered as the first Christian martyr. The word martyr comes from the Greek word, *martus*, meaning witness. It is the same word used by Jesus in Act 1:8 when he tells the disciples that they will be his “witnesses.” Skinner notes, “[j]ust as Jesus' activity continues in the life of the early church, so too does Jesus' rejection. No one said being his witnesses would be easy.” Stephen's story reminds us that the pattern of Christian life follows the pattern of Jesus' own life. Not all Christians or Christian communities experience persecution in the way that Stephen or the early church did. Yet there is something about the message of the gospel that “turns the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) and that often leads to resistance to its message.

- How, if at all, has your life followed the pattern of Jesus' life?

Tabitha/Dorcas Read Acts 9:36-43

To start, it may be helpful to note a couple of differences between this healing story in Acts and other healing stories in Acts and the Gospels. In most healing stories we learn almost nothing about the person being healed. Instead the focus is primarily on the act of healing and how that healing points to God's salvation offered through Jesus. But this story is different. First we learn the name of the person being healed and she has more than one name. She is Tabitha (an Aramaic name meaning gazelle) and Dorcas (a Greek name meaning gazelle). Given that the story chooses to share this detail, we are probably safe in assuming that

Tabitha/Dorcas was bilingual. She probably moved with ease between the Aramaic-speaking community and the Greek-speaking community. In this way, she embodies the spirit of Pentecost, able to speak and work and care for others in a multicultural community. Skinner describes her as a “bridge-builder” able to bring together people from diverse backgrounds into a new fellowship.

- Who are the bridge-builders in our community of faith? In the community of Menomonie?
- How has the church participated in building bridges at local, national, and international levels?

The second way this healing story differs from others is that we learn about Tabitha’s life and ministry. It’s not just that she can move easily between two communities, but she was “devoted to good works and acts of charity” (9:36). Skinner notes that her healing is not a reward for a job well-done, but a recognition of the importance and urgency of the work that she does. The clothing she made and distributed was a tender, even intimate gift that helped to support vulnerable members of the community. By bringing her back to life, God, working through Peter, ensures that this life-giving ministry goes on. Of course, the time will come when death will take her again, but for now her important ministry lives again.

- In what ways does OSL continue the ministry of Tabitha?
- Skinner calls the clothes Tabitha made “an intimate and caring gift” because they require personal, attentive knowledge of the recipient. When have you received a gift of that kind from someone? When have you given a gift like that?

Rhoda Read Acts 12:1-17

- A quick translation note: Rhoda is a slave and not a maid or servant as some translations have it. The fact that an early Christian household held slaves and that no one in Acts seems troubled by this is a reminder that the early church was not a perfect or ideal institution.

Rhoda’s story is interesting. She really plays a supporting role in a story that is largely about Peter’s escape from prison. Some interpreters have dismissed Rhoda as a comedic character because she leaves Peter standing out at the gate rather than leading him inside to safety. This, they argue, coupled with the fact that she is a slave makes it easy to dismiss her as a character.

Skinner, however, draws our attention to a couple of other details about her story that make it harder for us to dismiss her. She is the first one in the story to

recognize that God has answered the community's prayers. Peter, himself, didn't realize that his escape was real until he was safely outside the city gates. And the gathered community doesn't believe their prayers have been answered either when Rhoda comes to tell them that Peter is at the gate.

- Read Luke 24:9-11, 22-24. In what ways is Rhoda like the women who first testified to Jesus' resurrection? What conclusions might Luke want readers to reach by drawing the parallels?

Secondly, Rhoda takes herself seriously. She knows who she has seen and heard and she sticks to her story even if they gathered believers tell her she is "out of her mind" (9:15) Writes Skinner, "[i]n that small detail, she shows herself more willing to discover the power of prayer than anyone else."

- Have you ever given witness to something and not been believed? If so, how did you respond?
- How powerful do you believe prayer is? In general, do you approach prayer more like Rhoda, or more like those who doubt her report? Why? How, if it all, would you like your attitude toward prayer to change?

Priscilla and Aquila Read Acts 18:1-4, 24-28

- See Romans 16:3, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and 2 Timothy 4:19 for further mentions of Priscilla (called Prisca in these texts) and Aquila.
- A little historical background: In 49CE Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. According to a Roman historian, riots broke out in Rome between Jews who believed in Jesus and Jews who did not. Annoyed at these disturbances Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. His edict expired upon his death in 54CE when Nero became emperor.

Priscilla and Aquila seem to have been a part of the Jewish cohort expelled from Rome. Their skills as tentmakers made it financially possible for them to travel throughout the Mediterranean. We first meet them in Acts in the city of Corinth where they connect with Paul (who was also a tentmaker). We next learn that Priscilla and Aquila have made their way to Ephesus where they meet and then teach and guide a young preacher from Alexandria (in Egypt) named Apollos.

- What fiscal resources and social connections, if any, have helped you be a witness to Jesus? What resources and connections does OSL use to witness to and serve Jesus?

In Ephesus, the author of Acts begins to refer to the couple using Priscilla's name first (note also that in the 3 references to the couple in Paul's letters, Priscilla is

named first in two of three). This suggests that Priscilla may have been from a higher social status or that she was the more prominent/gifted worker of the two. Whatever the case, by listing her first both the author of Acts and Paul, remind us that women played a more prominent role in the early church than is usually acknowledged.

- Priscilla is but one of the women in Scripture (both the Old and the New Testament) who preach the good news and exercise leadership in their community. What other stories of biblical women can you think of? Which of their stories do you relate to you and why? Who are the faithful women in your life that have helped to shape your faith?

When Priscilla and Aquila meet Apollos, they, like others, find him to be a compelling and engaging speaker. He is committed to sharing the good news of Jesus and proclaiming him to be the Messiah. But, Acts notes, that he only knew about the baptism of John. And so Priscilla and Aquila take him aside and gently teach him more about the Christian faith (called the Way of God in the story 18:26). As a result of their gentle guidance, Apollos' faith is deepened and the believers in Ephesus prepare to send him out to share the good news in Achaia (western Greece).

- Who have been your teachers in faith? When, if ever, have you been a teacher of the faith?