

Tomorrow I will give my last finals for a semester in which I have made many mistakes. More mistakes than usual, because I was teaching a new class, and every time I turned around I realized there was something I should have done differently. After the midterm, I realized I should have been giving the students study guides for each unit. After our review sessions I realized I should have taught Chapters 11 and 12 more slowly. Lots of mistakes, no do-overs.

We've also come off a state legislative session in which record numbers of mistakes were made, in my view, only the perpetrators aren't sorry. The phrase "hell in a handbasket" keeps crossing my mind as I think about the damage to school children, to the environment, to the future of sustainable farming, and so much more.

So it was oddly reassuring to read the story from Acts today, in which many mistakes and missteps are made, but whose aftermath turned out better than we might have hoped for. The story opens, not with the idyllic community of chapter 4 where the Christians shared all things in common, but with a church split by regional differences. The Hellenists, Jews from outside Jerusalem who were more assimilated into the dominant Roman culture, were complaining that the local Jews, who had probably maintained more of their ethnic distinctness, were neglecting the Hellenists' widows in their daily food distribution. The Hellenists were probably recent arrivals in the Christian community, and after an initial flush of excitement at this new thing God was doing, were beginning to suspect they were second-class members.

So the twelve apostles called everyone together to beef up the food-server

brigade. They themselves, they explained, could not neglect the word of God to wait tables, raising the question of whether they had ever actually understood what Jesus said about the last being first and the first last. So please could everyone get together and choose someone else to help feed the widows. And they chose Stephen and six other men, all with Greek names, all, I suppose, Hellenists. They laid hands on them and everyone went on about their business, the word of God spreading and the number of disciples increasing.

Stephen, however, did not confine himself to the Meals on Wheels detail, but did great wonders and signs among the people. Apparently, unlike the twelve, he was able to do both the feeding and the preaching, and it just goes to show that however carefully we craft our job descriptions, the Holy Spirit blows where it will and sets in motion things we did not intend to set in motion. Stephen is so widely acclaimed that some non-Christian Jews feel threatened and come up with false charges against him, to try to suppress him. They bring their charges to the Sanhedrin, the council of priests, and claim that he is threatening the Temple and the Law. "And all who sat in the council looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." That is to say, not a beatific or serenely glowing face, but a ferocious, shining face. Think the Archangel Michael, not the little cherubs that flutter around at the feet of the Virgin Mary.

If this is starting to sound eerily reminiscent of the trial scenes for Jesus, you're not imagining things. Just as the authorities tried to stop Jesus, now they're trying to stop his followers. And Stephen doesn't make things better for himself, with the incendiary sermon he gives them about the way people have always

rejected God's messengers. "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Remind me, which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?" The authorities become enraged and allow him to be dragged out of the city to be stoned, and the stoners lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Stephen dies, echoing the words of Jesus on the cross.

So this is a story of a church that is contentious, overwhelmed, and suffering great loss. They are *not* equipped to handle the challenges of assimilating people from different backgrounds, or apportioning out the work in a dynamic, ever-changing environment. Their leaders now were Galilean fishermen just five years ago, not urban Jerusalemites. The last thing they probably needed was for one of their food service workers to get in trouble with the authorities. Darn those Hellenists anyway! And then there's this young man named Saul, who watches the stoning of Stephen and holds the killers' coats. We know, of course, that this is the man who will become Paul, the church planter and systematic theologian. But what's he doing at this moment? Is Saul already involved in persecuting Christians, or was this event sort of a catalyst for him that got him started on his relentless mission to do away with the blasphemy that God's messiah would end up crucified? Is Saul's presence at Stephen's death a moment of inspiration for him, that got him started on his mayhem through the Christian community, or is he here because he's already involved? We don't know, and Luke doesn't tell us.

What we do know is that after some time, Saul had an encounter with the risen Christ and became Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles. Earlier, in Acts 1:8,

Jesus had told his followers to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Here at the end of chapter 7, we see the seeds of that mission: the persecution that starts with Stephen’s martyrdom will spread the church through Judea, through Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The persecution that starts with Stephen’s martyrdom will mobilize Paul to spread Jesus’ movement far, far beyond Jerusalem and Judea. Wherever Saul was on his own personal journey at this moment, he was now hooked in to the movement of the Holy Spirit, willy-nilly.

That’s good news. While people were bumbling around misunderstanding each other and making poor decisions, the Holy Spirit was rolling with the mayhem, hooking random bad actors and pulling them into her gravitational field. While the members of the Sanhedrin were grinding their teeth at Stephen, the Holy Spirit was serenely setting up her chessboard so that his witness (martyr means witness) would set off a chain reaction to spread Jesus’ movement to the ends of the earth. While Saul held the coats of those who pulverized Stephen’s body, the Holy Spirit was getting him so interested in this movement that he could not walk away and just go make tents peacefully. God’s Holy Spirit was in the mess and the mistakes, using them jiu-jitsu-like to accomplish God’s will.

People often say that God has a plan, and I do not think that’s the case, if by “plan” they mean God has planned out every step of the future and knows what you’re going to do before you do it. That would negate our free will, and it also calls into question God’s tactics; it’s hard to imagine that God would really want Stephen to die so agonizingly, let alone the other horrific things that happen to innocent

people. But I do think that God has a plan writ large, and that plan is for the kingdom to come to all of us. That's what all of God's activity is aimed at, and to the extent that we mess it up or get in the way or block it, I think God just rolls with it, reformulates strategy, turns our rejections into building blocks. God is the great improviser.

This little picture of the early church is not a flattering one, and yet we see that out of this unpromising soil, a spectacular harvest grew. Do not despair, sisters and brothers, because that same Holy Spirit that was with our ancestors is with us now. Let us live the kingdom of God now as best we can, and have confidence that by the grace of God, the kingdom will come in all its fullness.

God of grace and glory, keep us stubborn and confident in your promise of the kingdom. Help us not to get weighed down by the malevolence and ignorance at work in the world, but be animated by hope and confidence in you, who are never cancelled out. May your kingdom come. Amen.