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## *Your Biography as Gospel*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**Easter 5 – Year A**

Well it's that time of year, when there are so many school graduations and college commencements. I'll be going to the Spelman College commencement next Monday, a week from tomorrow. Naturally I'm reminded of my graduations in years past; my own journey from being a schoolboy to being here before all of you today. I'm here as your priest, joining you in worship on many occasions. But I'm also a college professor, although nearing the end of my career. For a while longer I get to enjoy my own students graduate with college degrees and as PhDs. So you can imagine the kind of thoughts running through my mind; some nostalgia and regrets of course, but also pride and satisfaction.

But along with all that I was moved by today's scriptures to realize why my attention typically focuses on certain verses instead of others. It has to do with the kind of topics that claimed my attention back in graduate school. That was in the 1980s—more than 30 years ago now, and back when I was 30 years old. That's right, 30 and 30: feel free to do the math and you've got my age, roughly!]

And that reminds me of the funny situation that can happen when you're a graduate student, and you try to explain to children in grade school what grade *you're* in. So how do you count the grades after graduating from grade 12 in high school? Or how to account for the situation that you've been in school so long that you're not even taking courses anymore but—God help you—writing your thesis, maybe year after year? 'No, children, I'm not in grade 13 or 14 but grade 25!'

Anyhow, back to the connection to today's scriptures; the readings appointed for this 5<sup>th</sup> [Sabbath] of Easter. In the Episcopal Church this Sunday our first reading is about the martyrdom of St. Stephen the deacon. And the verse that always grabs my attention is the absolution that he grants to his murderers as they are stoning him to death. As the reading says from the Acts of the Apostles:

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 7:60)

The next verse that fascinates me is in the second reading that we heard, from the letter of 1 Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Now you can imagine that what claims my attention in that verse is my ethnic identity as an African American when I hear, "you are a chosen race." Then there's my vocational identity when I hear, 'you are a royal priesthood.' And finally I always feel challenged, as we all do I suspect, to hear that claim, 'you are a holy nation, God's own people.' Now we should be careful about equating the word 'nation' there with any national identity, such as our own identities as United States citizens. And maybe in some universal perspective God calls every ethnic group to be 'a chosen race ... God's own people, in order that they may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.' But oh! how I long wistfully that my beloved country in particular could righteously claim that identity of being "a holy nation, God's own people."

And that brings me to our third reading appointed for today, the gospel reading from John where Jesus makes that extraordinary claim:

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. (John 14:12-14)

‘Well, Lord Jesus,’ I say as a divinity school graduate, as a priest of the church, and as a baptized Christian who is also a United States citizen, ‘I say well, Lord, I ask in your name that we Christians might be empowered by you to do the “greater works” of assisting *our* country to be “a holy nation, God’s own people.”

Now church friends, I’ve learned from the many theologians who say that such expectations are theologically incorrect. These scriptures are about the church and not about political entities or categories, they argue persuasively. They are not even about the institutional church as we know it, as St. Augustine argued centuries ago in his classic book, *City of God*. Yes, I acknowledge the claim that the true church is a reality that only God can identify at any given time and location. But for the moment I want to invite us also to acknowledge our longing, our yearning, our deep desire that such identifications could be realized and achieved in our own nation, in our own ethnic communities, in our own institutions here and in the future going forward.

The apostle Paul himself expresses that longing with great pathos in his letter to the Romans:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—<sup>2</sup>I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup>For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. <sup>4</sup>They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; <sup>5</sup>to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. (Romans 9:1-5).

And then he adds the most remarkable claim, as extraordinary as our Lord’s claim in today’s gospel that ‘the one who believes in him will also do the works that he did and, in fact, will do greater works than these’ (John 14:12). For his part Paul declares, “It is not as though the word of God had failed.” (Romans 9:6).

What an extraordinary claim! It gives me pause as I so frequently fall into feeling the failures of our ethnic communities, and of our vocations and nations to live up to the high calling to be ‘God’s own people.’ How can it be that ‘the word of God has not failed us’—has not failed *us*—even if we have so grievously failed to be godly on our part? And that brings me back to my graduate student days and the question why these kinds of topics continue to rivet my attention for these 30 years and more.

Two areas of study claimed my attention back then: liberation theology was one, and biography as theology was another. Biography as theology invites us to look at the lives of significant persons and see exemplary connections between their stories and the gospel story. Liberation theology, as you might expect, claims that God in Christ is setting us free from domination by social, economic and political structures that dehumanize the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. Now over the years beginning in graduate school I’ve tried to connect the dots between these two approaches, between biography as theology and liberation theology. And that brings me back to today’s scriptures.

There in Acts is the biography of Stephen the deacon and martyr. We know only these key moments of his life story in its relationship to the gospel story. Stephen was among the first deacons called to emulate our Lord’s ministry of servanthood—servant ministry as the vocation of deacons. In carrying out that ministry he was persecuted as a martyr. But for a biography-as-theology he was exemplary in that he absolved his murderers by pronouncing over them similar words as our Lord himself invoked over his persecutors. As we recall Jesus declared from the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:24)

For a biography-as-theology it is that spirit of absolution that we Christians are exhorted to embody as the body of Christ alive and active in the world today. But precisely here we also see realized in Stephen’s biography the priestly function of

the church that is announced in 1 Peter's declaration for today:

You are ... a royal priesthood ... in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Yes, we Christians are also called to proclaim with our own lives and biographies the mighty act of God's forgiveness of sins that delivers all people 'out of darkness into God's marvelous light.' When we do so we help fulfill the church's priestly vocation to pronounce absolution of sinners in emulation of our Lord's words from the cross. For that in part is what priests do—a power and privilege passed on from Jesus' first apostles; the authority to forgive sins.

But that priestly absolution does not deny the *prophetic* call to the church to also be "a holy nation." This is to call our fellow citizens to a socially engaged citizenship, based on our own commitment to a social gospel or perhaps to a liberation theology. But it also fulfills our vocation to emulate our Lord who identified himself with the poor and the oppressed. As he pronounced in a biographical moment that day, reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue:

<sup>18</sup> 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor ...'

<sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-19; 21)

Church friends, that is also why Paul can declare in Romans that the word of God has not failed. It has not failed because all of the Christian story has not yet been fully told. It's still unfolding in our lives, in our biographies and in the coming lives of our children and their descendants. It is continuing to be told in my biography and yours biography. For today Christians like you and me continue the prophetic call to all nations to "bring good news to the poor ... to let the oppressed go free ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And as long—as long as we persist in such faith, hope and love we are fulfilling our longing—our deep desire for all people to be God's own people.

But not only that, we will also be doing the works greater than those that Christ accomplished in his own day—in particular the works of social change deriving from his catalytic work of universal redemption. That's what it would mean to bring many peoples 'out of darkness into God's marvelous light.' Can we get with that gospel? Can we be heralds and proclaimers, agents, enactors and doers, of that 'good news?' That's our calling, that's our trust, faith and hope. Let's live it out in our own biographies as theology—

if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.  
Come to him ... [and]

let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:3-4)

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.