

**New Life Episcopal Church
Uniontown, OH**

**A Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Easter
May 3, 2026**



The Stoning of St Stephen

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[Fifth Sunday of Easter – The Episcopal Church](#)

Acts 6 - 8

Demands of the Diaconate

The cover of your bulletin today portrays the last moments of the life of Saint Stephen, deacon in the early church. I was privileged to see these frescoes in person in the Vatican in the year 2000. The whole story of Stephen's life, and that of another deacon, Saint Lawrence, are laid out in beautiful frescoes in the Chapel of Pope Nicholas V, by the Renaissance artist Fra Angelico. In 2000, the frescoes had just been restored, after about 500 years of people rubbing up against them, and were beautiful to behold. You can't see them anymore, because tourists rubbing up against them would ruin all the restoration and the chapel is now closed to casual visitors, and so I received a glimpse of great artistry, as well as the lives of these saints. I've brought a book on the restorations with me today, and you may like to see it during Coffee Hour.

In the frescoes, Stephen's life begins with his ordination to the diaconate – he is ordained by Saint Peter explicitly to assist the 12 apostles so that they could devote themselves more exclusively to prayer. After the fresco of his ordination, the other frescoes show Stephen's diaconal duties: distributing alms to the poor, preaching to the people of Jerusalem, thereafter his Prosecution and Trial before the Sanhedrin. Then come the two scenes that are shown on our bulletin cover: Expulsion of St. Stephen from the city, and his martyrdom by stoning, six important moments in his life. Please note the final fresco of Stephen's stoning. Following the scriptural detail in the Book of Acts, Saul (later named Paul) stands by, holding the cloaks of those throwing stones, apparently approving of what they are doing.

The life of Stephen is covered in the Book of Acts, chapters six through seven. It states, "Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8) As often happens, people who are loving and tell truth to power are persecuted. His enemies set up false witnesses accusing him of blasphemy. Acts relates, "All those who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." (Acts 6:15). Stephen then preached to the Sanhedrin, telling them the entire story of salvation history, ending with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The council did not like what they heard. "They became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen." (7:54) "They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him" (7:58). As he was dying, Stephen said the same things that Jesus said on the cross: "Receive my spirit" 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)

Stephen is regarded as the first Christian martyr, and it is perhaps for this reason that his feast day is immediately after the coming of Jesus, on December 26. This underscores the danger of following the Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was

executed in 1945 for opposing Hitler in Germany, wrote, there is a cost for doing the right thing. Bonhoeffer called it “The Cost of Discipleship.”

This story of Stephen fits well into our story of the early Christian church. Since Easter Sunday, we have been hearing stories of encounters with the Risen Christ – from Mary Magdalene, to Thomas, to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. Here the action shifts to the dangers to the followers of Christ, to those who professed belief in Christ in a hostile environment.

It does take a lot of courage to follow Jesus. Elements in our own society are quite hostile to Christian values. We are all charged with standing up for Jesus. Deacons in particular are urged to take voice and action.

I remember when I was installed as rector at St. Paul's in downtown Canton in 2006. Various members of the parish came forward with token items, such as a Bible and a Prayer Book, vesting me with responsibility in ministering in that place. The parish had a resident deacon named Carol Duncan, who was an active spokesperson for those living in poverty. In her work, she found housing for the homeless, and often brought news from outside the church, into the church, that we be informed. This is indeed a diaconal duty. The token she brought to me was a newspaper, a reminder that we not be too comfortable inside our walls, when injustice is raging outside.