

Acts 7:51-8:1

‘You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.’

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 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. And Saul approved of their killing him.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

1 Peter 1:9-10

...for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry...

“And Still the Saints Go Marching In”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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I wanted to report what’s happened in the last few minutes. One of our members, Richard Senn, passed out while we were singing, and he was taken back into the Fellowship Hall where he is now. He is conscious, and talking. He’s a United Methodist preacher... didn’t want to hear the sermon, I guess. He’s doing fine, as far as we can tell. 911 has been called and they’re here, and he’ll be okay, I think. You have a right to know, and I wanted to tell you.

My office is right out that door and just around the corner, and the Columbarium is outside my window. Some say it’s morbid, some say it’s strange. Some say we’re focused as a church on death. Today we dedicate the Columbarium, David’s garden. I’d like to speak to the issue, because it’s important. The Pope is in this country, people are excited the Pope is here. He has met with people who have been sexually abused by priests, and asked them to forgive him. That was good. The Pope is here. What do you wear to see the Pope? Laura Bush made the mistake of wearing white. She didn’t know, I wouldn’t know, the Pope’s the only one who’s supposed to wear white. I expect that the

Pope really doesn't care. What do you say to the Pope? How do you act around the Pope? He came to the White House and he gave a speech and George Bush said to him after it was finished, "That was an awesome speech, Pope." I might have said that. Some thought that was a little odd, to tell His Holiness that he was awesome. But I never met the Pope. I never heard him speak. What do you tell the Pope after he speaks?

We had a bishop in this area who said that after he was elected bishop, he never preached a bad sermon. Saints alive. I've heard bishops preach bad sermons. In fact, I get to hear a different bishop preach every day for the next ten days, beginning Wednesday, and some of those sermons won't be very good, but I'm not going to tell them. Saints alive. How do you act around important people? Last church I was in, one of the Bronco cheerleaders was a member of the church, Beth Chrisler was her name. She was a Bronco cheerleader, more than that. Every team selects one to go to the Pro Bowl, a big honor. I mean, you're a Bronco cheerleader, but she was *the* Bronco cheerleader sent to the Pro Bowl. We had this big awkward kid whose mother thought it would be good for him to be an acolyte. He didn't. He'd light the candles, and anything on the altar that needed to have fire, he was good with fire, and then he'd sit back, kind of like where David is, and he'd get slouched down kind of at ease with himself and go to sleep, paid no attention to what was going on in the service. But at least he was in church. One day I mentioned to Jason, I said, "You'll never guess who's out there in the sanctuary, we've got a Bronco cheerleader, and she's on the right side of the sanctuary, see if you can find her." Let me say that Bronco cheerleaders don't look the same when they're in church as they do on the fifty yard line down at Mile High. But he found her. It took him a while. But we had his complete attention that Sunday.

What do we say to famous people? How do we act? Saints alive, what do we say to saints? We pay attention to them, we watch them to see if they're really saints. We pay attention to superstars and saints and people we look up to. We look carefully, it's important we do that. There's a young man in the church, he's a gifted athlete, his name is James. James went to a baseball game a week ago, and there was a superstar in the crowd. Ed McCaffrey, remember him? He sells feet things now. But he was a great wide receiver for the Broncos all pro number 87. He was there and he had brought his football, he was playing catch with some of the kids, and James went out there and was going to play catch with them until he caught the football and noticed on the football was the name of Michael Vick. Michael Vick played for the Atlanta Falcons and he's not a saint, in fact he's in prison. Got involved in dog-fighting, and James paid attention. You didn't see James playing catch. He'll never play with a football signed by someone who's cruel to animals. James is my hero. You pay attention. Pay attention to Brandon Marshall and Carmello Anthony. Both are superstars. They've got some work to do. Pay attention to the saints, pay attention to the celebrities. Learn from them. Do what they do, when they do good. Pay attention to Jesus.

Last Lent, some members of the church, actually the Tolivers, they're moving to Louisiana and I don't like that, I like them, I don't like that they're moving, but they sent us a Mardi Gras cake last Lent, a year ago. Did you ever see a Mardi Gras cake? It's called a king cake, a king cake. It's kind of low and it's kind of round and it's got

different odd colors, it's purple and orange and yellow and different colors like that, and it's full of sugar. It's really good. They didn't tell me it's called a king cake because there's the little plastic Jesus in the cake, and if you get the plastic Jesus you have good luck for the rest of your life. I was enjoying the piece of cake that I got until I bit into the plastic Jesus, and bit off his arm, and I thought, "So what?" I should have paid attention. Reverend Everhart pointed out something this week I had never thought about. She said, "Did you notice that the year that you bit off Jesus' arm was the same year you had that shoulder surgery?" Coincidence? I think not.

We pay attention to the celebrities and to the saints. The story about Stephen is an interesting story. Stephen was murdered. Stephen was a preacher, and he called his people stiff-necked, and that's the nicest thing he called them, and when you do that to a church congregation, you've got to know where the door is, and be close to it, and he didn't, and they caught him, and they killed him dead. Before he died he said something that Saul, who is Paul, heard. He said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and then he said, "Don't blame these people for the sin they're committing." Paul paid attention to the saint. Now look, they say Paul was converted on the road to Damascus when the bright light blinded him so he could see, you know? They say it happened on the road to Damascus, but I think it started on the road where Saint Stephen was stoned, when Paul watched the stoners do their terrible deed, and Paul held the coats of the stoners so they could get better leverage on their tosses. When Paul heard Stephen forgive his assailants, it sounded an awful lot like the words that had been quoted by another person, a crucified Savior from a cross, who said, "Forgive them, God, they don't know what they're doing." Pay attention to the saints, to the famous, to the celebrities. Watch them to see if they're real. Listen to them to hear if they're telling the truth. Saints, celebrities, people we look up to.

One of the things about saints to know, saints go marching. They seem so high and above us, they seem so much better than we, these saints, and we're just people. Or are we more than that? The writer of first Peter, he says it. "You are saints, you're God's people, you're a royal priesthood. You're a holy nation. You think sometimes you're no people. You are people. You think sometimes you're nothing. You're something. You're something else. You're something important." We are important. Saints go marching. We may not be celebrities, we may not be saints, exactly. You know what I think we are? I think we are probationary saints. You know, like the two young clergy we have, probationary saints. They're probation is only three years. Our probation is our whole lifetime. We've got to be patient with ourselves. Patient. Saints go marching. Probationary saints, sometimes we have to march in place. Probationary saints have to think about it sometimes. Let's be patient with ourselves. Let's be patient with each other.

The story of the woman who bought the mule was told to me by a Presbyterian preacher, so I guess it's okay to share it with you today. A woman bought a mule, it could have been a man, but it was a woman. She knew nothing about mules. She had a farm, she thought she ought to have a mule. His name was Horace. He became ill one day. She called the doctor. She was upset. A sick mule, what do you do with a sick mule? She

called the Veterinary School at CSU. Well, not really, it was someplace else. “Doctor,” she said, “Horace is sick. Could you come over right away, could you come over and take a look?” The doctor was busy, and he said, “Give him a dose of mineral oil, and if he isn’t all right in the morning, I’ll come take a look.” She said, “How do you give Horace mineral oil?” and he said, “You give it through a funnel.” She was afraid that the mule would bite her and the doctor said, “You don’t know anything about mules. It’s the other end.” So she went down to the barn and looked for a funnel, and the nearest thing she could find was Uncle Bill’s fox hunting horn, a beautiful gold-plated thing with tassels. She took the horn and affixed it to the proper portion of the mule’s personhood, and Horace was unperturbed. Still eyeing the mule, she reached behind her for some mineral oil. Unfortunately, she picked up a bottle of turpentine by mistake, and she gave Horace a liberal dose. Horace’s drooping ears jerked upright. His eyes widened, and he screamed like a panther, and he kicked down the side of the barn, and he took off down the road at a mad gallop. Every time he jumped, the horn would blow. All the dogs in the neighborhood knew, when they heard the sound of the horn, that Uncle Bill was going hunting, so they all joined in. Soon Horace had a pack of hounds in full cry behind him, and those who witnessed the chase said it was an incredible sight. Here’s Horace running at top speed, mellow notes issuing from the instrument, tassels flying, dogs barking. Old man Hogan, who hadn’t drawn a sober breath in over fifteen years, gave up alcohol and swearing, which reduced his vocabulary significantly. It was dark when Horace and the dogs reached the Intercoastal Waterway. The bridge tender heard the horn and thought it was a boat coming, so he raised the drawbridge as Horace galloped right up the span and was never heard or see again. The pack of dogs went right in behind him, but they swam to the surface. Uncle Bill’s hunting horn floated to the surface as well. Uncle Bill says he just can’t bring himself to blow it.

You know what, we’ve got to be patient with ourselves, and we’ve got to figure out a way to blow our own horns. The ministers are in this process now, required, of being evaluated. So we have to fill out our evaluations of ourselves, and the SPR committee is evaluating from their perspective, and what you do is, you give yourself a number on a scale of one to four. Well, I gave myself a four, the highest grade, when it comes to preaching, four. When it comes to teaching, four. When it comes to administration, four. If I could grade the leaders of the church, they would be four. When it comes to the ministry of this church, I’d give it a four. When it comes to the congregation, and the grasp of a group of caring people, you all get a four. Our children are a four. You just saw them. Our youth are a four. Our clergy are a four – the clergy may be four and a half. Our future is a four. The only thing I graded low was humility. But that’s all right. You see, we’ve got to blow our own horn.

The saints who have gone before us, they knew that. You’ve got to blow your own horn. You’ve got to be patient with yourself. Sometimes we just can’t bring ourselves to know what we’ve got to do, but we’ll get to it. And sometimes we spend our time running in place, but if we’re patient with ourselves, we realize that’s just we’re in training, and some day we’ll move forward. Some day we will. Be patient with ourselves, probationary saints go marching. Sometimes, the marching is slow. Sometimes you can’t even see the marching because it’s on the inside. Probationary saints go marching on, and the key

word is “on”, the saints go marching on. We’re always marching on. There’s a place where we want to get to, a thing we want to do. Saints have in mind a destination, they have a view of a vision. We may not always know how or when, but we know it’ll happen, and if it never happens in our lifetime, we know that what we have done is to prepare it for those who come after us. Saints go marching on, on toward tomorrow, on toward a better tomorrow, on toward something that’s never been. We persevere. Any of you hear that ball game on Thursday night? Talk about perseverance, 22 innings, and the score was 2 to 1. The Padres lost, the Rockies won. Both teams, persistent. Probationary saints are persistent. A royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.

I’m not altogether sure what’s going to happen at this conference I’m going to attend, where are we are supposed to rewrite the rules of the church. It starts Wednesday. But I’m pretty sure that some time, some speaker is going to stand up and tell us, all of us out there, going to tell us to come back and tell the people we represent to keep on keeping on. James Moore tells about a convention of sales people, and the person who gave the speech, the title of the speech was “Never Quit.” It’s a good speech, and I expect I’ll be hearing something like it. He yelled out to the audience, he said, “Did the Wright Brothers ever quit?” And they yelled right back to him, “No.” “Did Charles Lindbergh ever quit?” And right away they responded, “No way.” “Did Joan of Arc ever quit?” Even louder – “No!” So it continued, names and responses, and then the speaker shouted, “Did Thorndyke McKeister ever quit?” and there was this silence, a long pause, and finally someone from the back of the convention hall stood up and said out what everybody was thinking. “Forgive me, sir, for asking, but who in the world is Thorndyke McKeister? We never heard of him.” The speaker snapped right back, “Of course you never heard of him. It’s because he quit.”

It was Henry David Thoreau who said, “If we advance confidently in the direction of our dreams, if we endeavor to live the life that we have imagined, we will meet success unexpected in common hours.” Saints go marching on. They persevere, they’re patient. The saints go marching on, and some of them, their ashes we’re going to put into the garden behind the chapel. Some might ask, “Why do you put ashes of deceased church members here at the church? Some may say it’s morbid, maybe strange, some say it’s a focus on death, but it isn’t true. It isn’t morbid, it isn’t strange, and it really doesn’t focus on death. Some of the saints of the church will be buried here, after church, they’re here, and they’re here to remind us, we who are probationary saints, that saints go marching on. Patient with ourselves and each other, persevering to the very end of our lives. The Columbarium is not morbid, it’s vibrant. It’s not strange, it’s part of the live/death cycle. It’s not a focus on death, it’s a reminder to the living, to us, of the best way to live.