

December 26, 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As I write to you today I am reminded that today is the Feast of Stephen. For those not remembering their Church History or if it has been awhile since reading the *Book of Acts of the Apostles*; Stephen was the first of seven deacons appointed by the Apostles in Jerusalem. See, even at the beginning of the Church, there were squabbles! The Apostles noticed that the widows and orphans were not getting their fair share of the communal offerings of food and money. So from the beginning, Deacons have had the honor of distributing congregational offerings to those in need. Stephen was also the first Christian martyr. Because of his testimony as the first to die for the faith in Christ, the Church remembers him the day after it celebrates the birth of Stephen's Lord. It should also be remembered that in the process of being stoned to death, Stephen cried out for forgiveness for those throwing the stones.

The Church has endured chaos, heresies, and schisms and yet it lives on. I believe that the church's enduring nature is simply due to the fact that it is God who gathers us and calls us to proclaim the Good News. And as long as there is sin in the world, there will be those who trust in their hearts that this is God's world. And that ultimately good, truth, mercy, and grace will win the day. No doubt there will be other Stephen's along the way; those who are willing to die for our Lord but ultimately Christ will come again.

Ultimately, we have nothing to fear because in Christ Jesus we always have hope. Or as the Apostle Paul has said in Romans 5:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

My friends, let us move boldly into 2017! Filled with the same kind of Holy Joy the Wise Men felt when they knew they had arrived at the right place to worship the new born King of Kings. Knowing in our hearts that 'we' can do all things through Christ who strengthens 'us.'

Praying with you that 2017 will be the Best Year Ever!

*Pastor Peggy*