Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2026
Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-14

"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" (Acts 7:59–60).

Christians herald Stephen as the "first martyr," stoned, according to Luke (the author of Acts), by a Jewish mob after proclaiming the good news of Jesus to them. Stephen models the peaceful endurance that later becomes characteristic of Christian martyrdom tales. He kneels and prays to Jesus in the midst of murderous violence aimed at him. His prayer for forgiveness for those persecuting him in 7:60 intentionally echoes Luke's portrayal of Jesus dying on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke

23:34). Acts 'portrayal of Stephen epitomizes the ideal of Christian forgiveness: radically praying for those who persecute them (see also Matthew 5:44). Stephen's death sets the stage for future Christians to piously claim benevolence in the face of what they call unjust suffering.

Told this way, the story sounds nice. The problem is that the story is false. Acts scholars generally acknowledge that this book is a work of fiction. Brite Divinity School professor of New Testament Shelly A. Matthews calls Stephen the "perfect martyr" for Luke's theo-political agenda, which shifts the blame for Jesus's death off Rome and onto Jewish people.

In his Gospel, Luke cannot deny Rome's culpability for Jesus's crucifixion, a historical fact that was well-established for his audience. The figure of Stephen, an apostle without a reputation, provides Luke the ideal canvas to present Jesus's followers as compassionately self-controlled in the face of a violent Jewish mob enacting an extrajudicial killing. Luke misrepresents Jewish culpability. He creates both Stephen's reputation as a forgiving martyr and a reputation of Judaism as intolerantly violent. Luke's rhetorical fiction contributes to centuries of Christian anti-Judaism that persists today.

Stephen's martyrdom is also a seed for the mythical rhetoric of Christian persecution that endures to this day. The Christian Right insists it is being persecuted for its beliefs. Their rhetoric of martyrdom pits Christian religious

freedom to discriminate against the freedom of trans and queer people to exist and live. Beyond this, billions of dollars fund initiatives designed to combat the fear that Christianity's relevance is declining in the face of lower church attendance and numbers of people identifying as Christian. (Think, for example, of the work and money the Lilly Endowment has invested in American Christianity.) Despite Christianity's cultural dominance, we fear its decline. Fueled by myths of martyrdom, that fear drives us.

"The problem with the rhetoric of persecution is that it distracts from those very real instances of persecution." In an interview for NPR's "On the Media," historian of early Christianity and author of The Myth of Persecution, Candida Moss, spoke about how the ancient persecution of Christians was never as widespread as it is depicted in the early church's martyrdom tales and contemporary culture.

Moss points out that Christian veneration of martyrs heightens after Christians take power as the Roman Empire. These stories gave them license to violently persecute Jews, heretics and "pagans" — a rhetorical term that encapsulates a wide range of ancient religious practices and beliefs. In the interview, she notices the similarities today: Christian martyrdom rhetoric intensifies when the Christian Right holds power.

The Christian rhetoric of persecution that legitimates violence against marginalized populations originates in Acts 'fictional story of Stephen's perfect martyrdom. We cannot perpetuate the ancient and modern myth that Christianity thrives despite persecution. We must not ignore the violent intentions that motivate these rhetorical narratives.

As Christians committed to "rejecting any ideology" that "would legitimate forms of injustice", we should speak truth to our own power. "Just because I am very committed to [UCC Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Methodist and/or Lutheran Christianity] and to these stories doesn't mean that I shouldn't also acknowledge the problematic ways in which Christian history is deployed," Moss says.

Truth-telling encourages us to look back, down, and around for the folks our texts and culture attempt to trample.

We need to acknowledge the *fictional nature* of Stephen's martyrdom and the history that Luke constructs in Acts and name the violence it enables through the images of Stephen and Jesus's forgiveness. Through this truth-telling, we might counter this violence and seek repair and reconciliation.

Our truth-telling can extend to John's Gospel, a text that overtly vilifies Jews and has legitimized anti-Semitic violence. This week's Gospel text contains a paradigmatic

passage that justifies Christian exclusivism. “Jesus said to [Thomas], ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (14:6). As with Acts’s depiction of Stephen, this text demands we acknowledge how this verse has enabled violent evangelism in the name of saving souls.

Telling the truth about John 14:1-14 requires that we admit the text’s complicity – as well as our own – in presuming Jesus and Christianity rise singularly from the margins. Who have we excluded and left behind in our quest for power? Truth-telling encourages us to look back, down, and around for the folks our texts and culture attempt to trample. As we practice resurrection this Easter season, we can look for ways to bring new ways, truths, and life to the stories we choose to tell.

Questions for reflection on Luke’s Acts of the Apostles 7:55–60

1. What challenges does “speaking truth to our own power” present? How can doing this make us more responsible and just Christians?
2. What does it mean, as Christians, to read and discuss texts like Acts as fiction, like many of us do for stories in books like Genesis? How do we still read fictional stories as holy and authoritative?

3. How does the rhetoric of persecution differ from real, lived experiences of persecution? How do we center these realities without using harmful rhetoric?