

God's Call is Often Bigger Than Our Expectations
Acts 6:1-7:2a, 44-60 NLT
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ACTS 6:1-72A, 44-60

NLT

¹But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

²So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. ³And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. ⁴Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."

⁵Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). ⁶These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

⁷So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

⁸Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. ⁹But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. ¹⁰None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

¹¹So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." ¹²This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

¹³The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. ¹⁴We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.

¹⁶Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these accusations true?" ¹⁷This was Stephen's reply: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me.

⁴⁴"Our ancestors carried the Tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed according to the plan God had shown to Moses. ⁴⁵Years later, when Joshua led our ancestors in battle against the nations that God drove out of this land, the Tabernacle was taken with them into their new territory. And it stayed there until the time of King David.

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⁴⁶"David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who actually built it. ⁴⁸However, the Most High doesn't live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says, ⁴⁹'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that?' asks the LORD. 'Could you build me such a resting place? ⁵⁰Didn't my hands make both heaven and earth?'

⁵¹"You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That's what your ancestors did, and so do you! ⁵²Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered. ⁵³You deliberately disobeyed God's law, even though you received it from the hands of angels."

⁵⁴The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. ⁵⁶And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

⁵⁷Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him ⁵⁸and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

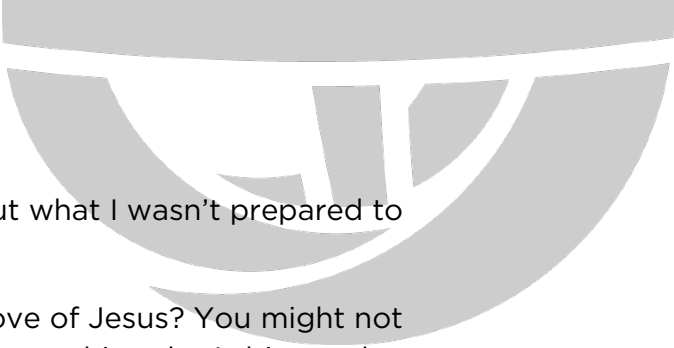
⁵⁹As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

How far would you be willing to go to share the love of Jesus?

I came face to face with that question on a mission trip a few years back. A girl named Brittany signed up to go. Or, should I say, her mom signed her up. She really wasn't interested. She didn't like sleeping on the floor – and we were going to be doing plenty of that. She didn't like manual labor – and we were going to be doing plenty of that too. She hated long car trips. She didn't want to talk about her faith. And, she told me, if I had any thoughts of asking her to pray, or lead a group, or count on her for pretty much anything, I'd better forget them right now. Bless her heart. I have to admit I breathed a sigh of relief when she ended up riding in a different van. And I confess I took a little twisted pleasure in putting her on the most challenging work site ... and assigning her to the crew that had to clean out the showers.

Before the trip, if you'd asked her that question – how far she'd be willing to go to share the love of Jesus – I don't think she'd have had much of an answer. She was more focused on complaining about how this was NOT how she wanted to spend her summer vacation.

But here's the thing: before the trip, if you'd asked me that question – how far I'd be willing to go to share the love of Jesus – I'd have had a great answer. I'd gladly sleep on the floor, and work until my muscles were sore, and talk about my faith. I love those things. They're a ton of fun, they make me grateful for what I have, and



it makes me feel really good to help other people. But what I wasn't prepared to do was love Brittany.

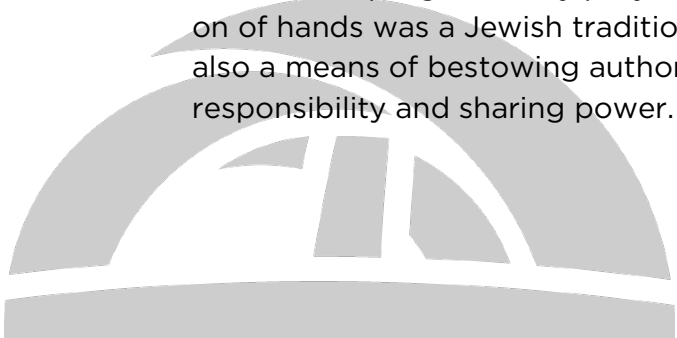
So how far would you be willing to go to share the love of Jesus? You might not have an answer until you find God calling you to do something that's bigger than you expect. You sign up to serve once at Open Table and discover you have a passion for feeding hungry kids. You volunteer to tutor at the elementary school and find yourself becoming a surrogate grandparent for an immigrant family far from home. You take one mission trip to Tanzania and soon you're consumed with thoughts of how to help the people of Iambi Hospital. You reluctantly agree to mentor a confirmation small group and three years later you realize those Wednesday nights were often the highlight of your week. Sometimes we end up way more involved than we first expected.

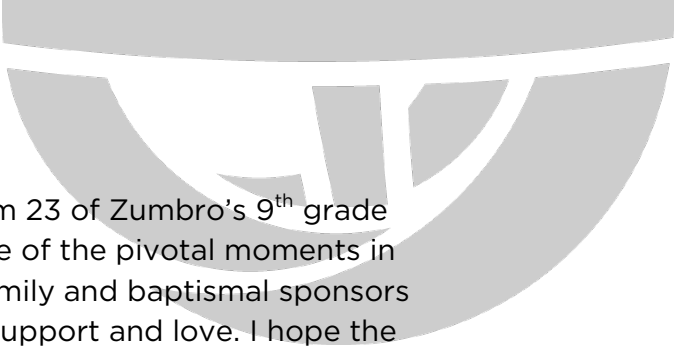
That's so often how God works, though. When God asked Moses to rescue the slaves from Pharaoh, Moses probably didn't think he'd spend the next 40 years wandering with them in the wilderness. When God asked Mary to bear the Christ child, she didn't dream she would also have to watch him die on the cross. When God asked Stephen to step up and make sure the widows had enough food, he wasn't planning on facing an angry, rock-throwing mob. Of course, the Bible says that following Jesus comes with a cost. We just don't always know what that cost is until we're asked to pay it.

If the sound of this is making you nervous, you can relax a bit. None of us are going to be martyrs for our faith. I certainly don't plan on it. But you may have to give up your time. You may have to share your money. You may have to find the person we find most unlovable and figure out how to love them. At some point your faith is probably going to lead you somewhere you weren't planning on going ... and you're going to have to figure out what you're going to do next.

The amazing thing is, again and again God's people step forward in faith because they feel compelled to answer God's call. It isn't always easy. It doesn't always make sense. But they do it because it's the way they can make a difference. They do it because they've heard the words of Jesus and been changed by them. Love your enemies. Blessed are the peacemakers. Show mercy. Be a good neighbor. That's what united the early church. That's what compelled them to care for the widows, and to preach the gospel, and to stand up in the face of injustice.

I don't know if you caught it, but there's a lovely little detail in the beginning of the Acts story: After the twelve apostles chose the seven men to lead the food distribution program, they prayed for them and laid their hands on them. Laying on of hands was a Jewish tradition. It was a means of offering blessing. But it was also a means of bestowing authority. It was the physical act of passing on responsibility and sharing power.





That seems especially fitting for this morning. At 11am 23 of Zumbro's 9th grade confirmands will affirm their baptismal promises. One of the pivotal moments in that service is the laying on of hands. Parents and family and baptismal sponsors will gather around and offer a tangible sign of their support and love. I hope the students feel the weight - the connection to the great cloud of witnesses who have shared the love of Jesus with them. And I hope they realize what else it means: that we'll be praying for them. But we'll also be passing the mantle on to them. Affirming one's faith - at any age - means answering God's call to serve. It's up to you to do what Jesus would do. To love freely. To give generously. To forgive graciously. To serve selflessly. And when that happens, all we can do is trust that God is leading us, showing us the way, giving us the strength to serve, using our gifts.

By the way, I'm ashamed to admit I never really did give loving Brittany a shot. I moved to a different church not long after that mission trip. It was kind of a relief. But a few weeks ago, I saw Brittany in a photo in my Facebook feed. Oh, I don't keep in touch with her. It was posted by someone else in my former church. The picture was of a group of young adults who were coming back from a week. Brittany was on a mission trip. She's figured out how far she's willing to go ... and then taken one more step.

So back to the question: how far are you willing to go to share the love of Jesus?

Would you be willing to give up a week of your summer to go on a mission trip? Would you be willing to offer to pray with someone who's hurting? Would you be willing to speak up when you see a kid being bullied or hear a snide comment that tears down a whole group of people because of their religion, or their gender, or the color of their skin? Would you be willing to lay down your life for your friends if that's what it took?

You might not be able to answer this question today. And you might not feel like you can say yes when God calls you. But I hope you will think about it. Because while we might not always end up where we expect, God promises we won't be making the journey alone. We have a cloud of witnesses cheering us on. We have the Holy Spirit giving us what we need. And we have a Savior that's worth living - and, yes, even worth dying - for.

