



## “Likeness Through Beholding”

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*Acts 7:51-60*

My last year in college I waited tables at a popular restaurant and I was an awesome waiter! Let me tell you, my starched button down shirt was clean and crisp; my black pants pressed to perfection; a blinding white apron wrapped purposefully around my waist; five black ball point pens single file in my apron pocket; and work boots spit-shined with military precision. I greeted each guest as if he or she were a long-lost friend. My attention to detail was eclipsed only by the smile on my face. I knew the menu inside and out, from cover to cover, beginning to end – Tequila Lime Chicken: a split chicken breast marinated in fresh lime juice and tequila with a hint of cilantro served with a side of fresh smashed potatoes and Maytag blue cheese coleslaw.

I was the best waiter... and I loved it! Who am I kidding, being in the food service industry was hard. I had impatient customers, lousy tips, and extremely long hours causing my feet to feel like aching concrete blocks. It was exhausting and thankless work. Once, I watched as a family I had patiently served tried to sneak out of the restaurant without paying their bill.

Yet, even on my bad days, being a waiter was not a life or death situation. In the Scripture reading this morning, for Stephen, serving tables meant death, not because he was a waiter, but because he had decided to live like Jesus. He had decided to preach like Jesus. He had decided to be a witness for Jesus. He made the choice to gaze constantly upon Jesus, learn from Jesus’ disciples, and be a martyr for Christ. Stephen was a better waiter than I. He not only served food but he served all-inclusive, loving, justice-oriented nourishment to followers on the margins. Stephen was the best waiter.

In the sixth chapter of Acts the author describes how Stephen was chosen as one of the seven men who would “wait on tables,” in order to serve widows and orphans... those that needed the most social assistance. The Greek Jews were upset with the Hebrew Jews for neglecting them and not serving enough food to their people. We see this clash of cultures between the Hebrews and Greeks and the tension spill over into the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jewish people, who, more than likely, showed favor for the Hebraic Jews rather than the Greeks.

Stephen, who had a Greek name and was probably a convert to Judaism, was said to have been “filled with wisdom from the Holy Spirit,” and the disciples found that he could be an exceptional witness to the all-encompassing love of Jesus. So, they made him a waiter. He distributed nourishment: not only good food, but the good news of Jesus’s reordering of society. Stephen became a waiter to all people, God-fearers, Gentiles, freed slaves, orphans, widows, Hebrews, Greeks... all people. It was for this, that he received his death sentence. It was for this that the establishment would rise up against him in anger. It was for this that his death would mimic the sacrifice of Jesus. It was for this, for revealing Jesus’s plans to destroy the old laws

and the old structures, that the stones of fear and hatred would become tools of death. Stephen became a waiter for all people, a witness to the world.

Where did Stephen learn how to serve like this? Jesus. Stephen took upon himself the very essence of Christ. Stephen became the first martyr, a Spirit-led witness, because he learned how to behold, gaze upon, ponder Christ's characteristics – Christ's likeness. Stephen was a servant because he observed the servanthood of Jesus. Stephen observed Jesus's love for everyone, those who were unlovable, untouchable, and uninvited. Stephen lived out the image of Christ by ministering to, witnessing to, and serving everyone in the community, regardless of class, gender, or cultural beliefs. Stephen set an example for us. He was a witness to Jesus's love and acceptance; he was a witness to Jesus's service and sacrifice; he was a witness to Jesus's care and compassion. He was a witness to the likeness of Christ.

The Greek word for "martyr" is where we get our more common word "witness." Stephen beheld Christ and became more like Jesus not only through service, but also by speaking out. Stephen didn't keep silent. Witnesses of Jesus do not keep their faith private. They refuse to keep their mouths shut against the forces of injustice, inequality, and prejudice. Witnesses of Jesus refuse to back down. Martyrs are put to death, not for their convictions, but for expressing their convictions. Witnesses who live and witnesses who die all have one thing in common, they open their mouths. Witnesses speak out and witnesses stand up.

Stephen was a witness, speaking out against the unruly power of the world and speaking up for the compassionate power of Jesus. But, Stephen didn't immediately tell the religious court what he is thinking. There are sixty tiresome verses of Stephen's soliloquy to the Sanhedrin. Stephen, as would any person on trial with a possible death sentence, tried to "butter-up" the Sanhedrin by recounting Jewish history. He did some name-dropping and regaled the judges with his musings about Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. These significant figures in Jewish history followed God out into the world, stood alone against great odds, and spoke up. Stephen even compared himself to the Jewish prophets as he too followed the leading of a just and loving God into the world. For him this leading came through Jesus Christ. Stephen held fast to his belief that God was, is, and always will be bigger than any religious establishment, any oppressive law, or any political confinement.

However, after his eloquent and exhaustive account of Judaic history the anger of the Sanhedrin and the crowd was not quieted. Stephen was accused of blasphemy for speaking out against the Temple and the religious authorities. Stephen could feel the tension rising, he could see the crowd with their jaws pulsating, he could feel the fire in their eyes and in their hearts. Stephen, the witness, had enough and spoke up. "YOU! You stiff necked people! You hard hearted people! You people with wax in your ears! You betrayers of Jesus! You people who worship your religious traditions! YOU!"

And that's what prophets do - they have the strength to move from the safety of the third person to the prophetic voice of the second person. Prophets actually point their fingers, literally and verbally, and say, "You...are the guilty ones." Stephen's judges didn't appreciate that the one who was on trial was trying to convict them of being criminals. Stephen's finger pointing towards the Sanhedrin quickly became a vengeful mob of anger-clenched jaws and stone-

clenched hands back at Stephen. They gnashed their teeth at him. They, in essence, snapped at him like animals. They were like wild beasts eager to ravage their prey. The crowd was merciless to the very depths of their beings and so they “cried out in a loud voice, they stopped up their ears, they rushed at him as one large group, and stoned him to death!”

But as we see in this text, Stephen’s demeanor was in direct opposition to the wildness and anger of the crowd. His behavior was in contrast to theirs. The text says, “But Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” Stephen saw Jesus. Stephen knew what Jesus looked like and knew what Christ-likeness was supposed to be because he beheld Jesus, he pondered Jesus, he lived as Jesus lived and died as Jesus died.

The stones came raining down upon him and we see the death of Stephen and the death of Jesus as if they were one story. Stephen looked up into heaven, calling out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” We remember Jesus’s own words on the cross, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And as the stones continued to batter Stephen’s body he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” We remember the words of Jesus, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Stephen became like Jesus by embodying the beauty and brokenness that comes through beholding Christ.

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a story of a young man named Ernest who lived in a little village across the valley from a magnificent, almost divine rock in the shape of a face. As a child, Ernest heard of a prophecy that someday a great man who looked like the face on this rock would come to the village and be a great leader. Ernest always wondered who this would be. He would gaze at the rock for hours, pondering it, studying its face. Because he looked upon the face everyday he began to understand it and live the love and serenity that was shown in The Great Stone Face.

A few years passed when a wealthy traveler named Gathergold came to town. He was an exceedingly rich merchant, and owner of a whole fleet of ships. Many of the villagers thought that Gathergold bore a striking resemblance to the Great Stone Face. But Ernest turned sadly from this prophecy as he knew that the face on his heart whom he had pondered everyday was not that of Gathergold.

The next person to come into the village was named Old Blood and Thunder. This war-worn veteran was mature and infirmed with age. He wanted to come back to his home village to get away from the pounding of the guns. The inhabitants welcomed this warrior and were sure that he was the one whom the village had been waiting for.

Ernest knew that the man of prophecy would possess the gentle wisdom, and deep, broad, tender sympathies that Old Blood and Thunder didn’t have; “This is not the man of prophecy,” sighed Ernest to himself.

There were then reports affirming that the likeness of the Great Stone Face had appeared upon the broad shoulders of a certain eminent statesman. Instead of the rich man's wealth and the warrior's sword, he had a powerful tongue. This tongue finally persuaded his countrymen to

select him for the Presidency. They named him Old Stony Phiz. Yet, Ernest knew that this sweet-talker was not the one he had been gazing upon on the mountain.

So, the years hurried by and Ernest became old and gray. And in his age, he had learned much wisdom and had become a sage and teacher to all the people in the town. He had a sensitive heart and loving nature. And one night, at sunset, Ernest had to address the town as he often did. The town gathered together to listen to the genuine words that Ernest spoke. As he spoke passionately and reverently a white mist settled around the mountain and made white hair and a white beard upon the Great Stone Face. A townsman shouted, “Behold! Behold! Ernest is himself the likeness of the Great Stone Face!” Then all the people looked and saw that it was true. The prophecy was fulfilled. But Ernest, walked slowly homeward, still hoping that someone wiser and better than he would by and by appear, bearing a resemblance to the Great Stone Face.

Ernest stared upon, observed the Great Stone Face. He prayerfully pondered what a true leader should be. He became wise, self-giving, and humble. He became the face. Stephen too prayerfully pondered what a true leader should be. He emulated the life of Jesus, serving, giving, loving, and sacrificing. Earlier in the sixth chapter of Acts, it says “And all who sat in the council looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” Stephen beheld and gazed upon Jesus with such frequency that his face was as radiant as an angel’s. Stephen gave himself to be a sacrifice so that the brilliance of God might be made known to all and the love of God could be spread across the world. And at his death, Stephen knew what Jesus looked like and recognized him in the clouds. He was a waiter who witnessed through his words and his actions. He became like Christ.

Will the world look at us and say, “Behold! Behold! We are the likeness of the Risen Christ?” Are we willing to give up our full lives to be God’s witnesses in the world? Are we willing to be servants? Are we willing to speak out and stand up? Are we willing to sacrifice? It is often challenging to be witnesses for Christ because many times we are on the other side of the mob attacking others with clenched jaws and tight fists, white-knuckling our stones in order to beat down the Christ-likeness we so desperately seek. We must be like Stephen and take a stand, speak up, and be servants even if the laws and stones of establishment rock us to our cores.

We must reflect Jesus in our consumeristic world. We must reflect Jesus in our racially charged world. We must reflect Jesus by protecting the immigrant and refugee. We must reflect Jesus by caring for our planet. We must reflect Jesus by loving our enemies. We must reflect Jesus by serving and loving all people. Then... then our faces will shine like that of an angel; then we will witness like Stephen; then we will be like Christ; then we will experience “likeness through beholding.” Then...

Amen.