

Acts 6:1-9, 7:2a, 51-60

Back when I was younger, I recall playing a type of game with other boys in which we tried to make each other flinch. We always stopped short of hitting each other in the face, but even knowing that we were not going to be hit, it was instinctive to duck, back away, or at least to blink our eyes. “Ha! Made you flinch!” were the words of victory that almost always were said when the game was over.

Games like this are possible because by nature we humans defend ourselves. And not just against flying fists. We defend ourselves against flying words as well. Mother should not be surprised at the reaction that comes from her children when she sees a broken lamp on the floor and says, “Who did this?” It would be quite unnatural for her child to quickly raise his or her hand and say, “I did...it was me.” We only need look back at our first parents in Eden to be reminded that because of sin--once it entered the world, and thus, entered into us--that the natural instinct all of us have is to shrug our shoulders when accused and place the blame elsewhere.

Coming to church is no game, but nonetheless, when we sit down in the pew we do have the tendency to treat it as such. By nature we duck, back away, or at least we blink our eyes when God uses the mouth of His pastor to accuse us with His Law. Perhaps we half expect the pastor to conclude his sermon, not with the word, “Amen,” but with the phrase, “Ha! Made you flinch!”

There are two sermons in the Book of Acts that we want to look at today. One is our text for this morning in Acts 6 and 7. The other is the sermon Peter preached to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Peter did not stop short with his flying fist when he preached his sermon. He smacked his hearers hard in the face with the words, “*You crucified...Him whom God made both Lord and Christ!*” “*The Word of God,*” writes the author to the Book of Hebrews, “*is sharper than any two--edged sword and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit.*” No wonder it says in Acts 2 that after Peter accused them with the Law, his hearers “*were pierced to the heart and said, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’*”

The other sermon we are looking at, preached by Stephen in Acts 6 and 7, was also preached in Jerusalem, but to a different crowd. He, like Peter, did not stop short with the Law. “*You murdered...the Righteous One,*” he proclaimed, most likely toward the top of his lungs. Rather than piercing them to the heart, however, his hearers became enraged. They ground their teeth at him, cast him out of the city, and stoned Stephen to death.

Now here is a question for us to ponder. Of the two reactions to these two sermons, which one was natural and instinctive, and which one was not? Was it natural for Peter’s hearers to be cut to the heart and sorrow over their sin, or was it natural for Stephen’s hearers to be enraged at the preacher and put him to death? By nature we defend ourselves, even when it is God who is accusing us. Stephen’s hearers acted according to their natural instinct. What Peter’s hearers did, in being cut to the heart by the Law, was totally unnatural. It came, not from within them, but from God.

This means that when you come to church and sit down in the pew, it is an unnatural act. When you open your ears and listen to the Word of God, this is not instinctive on your part. When God’s accusing Law pierces your heart and you repent of your sinful ways, this is completely foreign to us. It is not natural for us to act in this manner. What I’m saying, friends, is that all these things are not from within you; they come from God. It is God who is at work in you causing you to act in a way that is completely foreign to our human nature.

If you acted naturally, you would duck, blink, and back away when the flying words of God's Law came at you like a fist. If you acted naturally, you wouldn't even come here in the first place. Or if you came, you would pay little attention and you may even have some rage against the preacher. The Old Adam within us is still shrugging his shoulders when God says to us, "You, too, murdered the Righteous One...it was your sinfulness that crucified the Lord of Glory!" By nature we try to deflect God's Law and not let it pierce us to the heart. But all who live according to their nature; who live according to the flesh will perish.

God is merciful. He steps into your life. He who made you His children in Holy Baptism refuses to let nature follow its course with you. He puts His Law in your ears. He cuts you to the heart and leads you to repent of your sinful life. When Peter's hearers were pierced to the heart, this was their salvation, for God did not leave them this way. Through Peter, He gave them words of forgiveness connected to Holy Baptism, and these poor sinners were saved from eternal destruction. Stephen's hearers covered their ears with their hands, it says. They resisted the Holy Spirit. They did not allow God to work within them even though this is precisely what God, out of love, desired to do. God does not cut you with His Law for the fun of it. He opens your heart in order to pour His grace into it. In Baptism He opens the floodgates. In Holy Communion Jesus gives you His cup of mercy, and His cleansing blood heals your wounds and forgives your sins.

And as unnatural as it is for us to repent upon being cut by the Law, it is even more unnatural for us to believe the saving words of the Holy Gospel. Look at Stephen. He was being stoned. His angry hearers were picking up large stones and throwing them at him, trying above all, to hit him in the head. This was no game of flinch. They were intent on murdering him. And yet Stephen forgives them. "*Lord,*" he prays, "*do not hold this sin against them.*" How unnatural! The natural thing to do when someone is throwing a rock at your head is to duck, or at least to cover your head with your hands. It would even be natural to curse them, but not to forgive them. Stephen acted unnaturally because God was at work in him. Jesus lived in his heart. Jesus, who forgave His crucifiers from the cross, was forgiving Stephen's murderers from within him and through him.

Jesus does not live within us by nature. By nature the devil does. By nature sin reigns within us. But you who now belong to Christ--washed clean of your sin in Holy Baptism, nourished with your Savior's body and blood in the Sacrament--you live, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Your faith is not of your own making. It is born of God. The fact that you love Jesus, love His house of mercy, love His words of grace, and His Sacrament on the altar for you--this is God's doing in you. By nature we, like Stephen's murderers, would close our ears to Jesus. But He who loves you takes His nail-pierced hands and opens your ears to His words. "*I am the Way,*" He says to you, "*the Truth and the Life...and I go to prepare a place...in My Father's House for you.*" How unnatural for God to love such wicked sinners as us! But this is His way. This is how He is. It seems unnatural to us, but to God it is what He does. He forgives the ungodly. He gives life to the dying. He promises a place in heaven to those who do not deserve it.

You, my friend, are one whom God loves. You are one for whom Jesus died. One who is now forgiven of your sins. Believing this is not the natural thing to do. Nor is living this at all natural. But Jesus now lives within you. You do not flinch at His Law, but best of all, you believe His Gospel--that He is, for you, the Way, the Truth, and the Life; that your room He is preparing in His Father's House. Amen.