

The United Church of Moscow
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Acts of the Ordinary: Stephen
Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60

The story of Stephen is one of the more well-known stories in the book of Acts. Because it takes up nearly three entire chapters. And because Stephen is considered the first “martyr” of the Christian church, meaning he is the first person to be killed for the sake of proclaiming the ways of Jesus.

But while we often focus Stephen’s story on his death, there might be even more to learn from his life. Through examining his life, we discover that:

The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian character.

Jordann and Stephen

When I think of “Christian character,” I think of my friend, Jordann. Jordann is one of several pastors at a large baptist church in Texas; she’s an ordinary pastor who practices ordinary faith with great care. She preaches, leads bible studies, offers pastoral care, is a great listener, is incredibly kind, and very reliable. As part of her regular work in the church over the last year, she has also started doing something called “clergy accompaniment” at the Dallas ICE detention center.

She, along with a group of other clergy members, social workers, and community volunteers have a tent set up outside the facility, where they provide physical accompaniment, pastoral care, and rapid-response aid to migrants facing check-ins and potential detention at the ICE facility.

But she sees this as a part of her job as a pastor in Dallas. She insists, “I’m not a hero. I’m just doing my job. I’m just doing the right thing.” Jordann is just doing what she thinks Jesus would want her to do. She is simply demonstrating ordinary christian character.

Stephen, whose story we read parts of today, was an ordinary pastor practicing ordinary faith too. He was appointed to care for the widows and the poor, and to help with the distribution of food (Acts 6:1-7). He is doing his job; being a good preacher, mentor, friend, offering care for the poor, and helping those in need.

The text tells us that Stephen is filled with wisdom, grace, and with the spirit. But he is not a hero. He is just doing his job. Just doing what he thinks Jesus would want him to do. He is simply demonstrating ordinary christian character.

Both the work that my friend and Stepehen do isn't big or flashy. They aren't trying to change the world. They are simply trying to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk with God in humility. They are simply doing what they think Christ would want them to do. They demonstrate ordinary christian character.

You and Me

I think there are a lot of you here who can relate to that. You don't wake up in the morning thinking you're going to change the world. You don't do big, flashy, extravagant things.

But you show up to help those who are most in need in our community: you help restock our little free pantry, you show kindness to your neighbors, you volunteer your time and talent at local nonprofits helping others, and you try to help others when you can. You try to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk with God in humility. You practice ordinary Christian character, too.

But sometimes, practicing ordinary Christian character doesn't yield the responses or the results we hoped for.

Negativity

A few months ago, my friend, Jordann had a really difficult encounter during her normal rotation of clergy accompaniment at the ICE facility.

There was a man who drove six hours to attend his routine migrant check-in, but he was unexpectedly detained. One of the last things he did before entering a holding cell was to call his friends and let them know what happened, and also to inform them that the car he had borrowed from them to get to Dallas would need to be picked up because he was unsure if or when he would be released. As per the detention center's policy, he left the car keys with the agency and was assured the rightful owners could come pick the car up.

So, the car's owners made the long six-hour journey to Dallas with their two year old and approached my friend, Jordann. They explained their situation, asked her to pray with them, and then requested that she accompany them to speak with the ICE officers in the parking lot in order to get their car.

There was a mutual understanding between them that as a white, English-speaking clergy person, Jordann might be better received by the officers. Unfortunately, that assumption turned out to be false.

From nearly the moment they walked up to the officers, both the family and Jordann were berated, lied to, and talked down to. The officers lied about the whereabouts of the family's car and said awful and untruthful things to and about Jordann. Throughout the conversation, they used offensive and expletive language, refusing to stop cursing even when Jordann pointed out that a scared two-year old was present. At one point brought in an additional officer to further intimidate and deter Jordann from helping this family lawfully obtain their property.

While practicing ordinary Christian character, Jordann experienced negativity.

Stephen too, was just doing his job. He was living his life the way Christ instructed and demonstrated, and according to how the disciples appointed him. He spoke about Jesus, he walked with kindness, he helped care for the poor, he distributed food, he took care of widows, he entered into theological debates with people.

And in the midst of his normal ministry, he was confronted, seized, and arrested. And because there were no real accusations that people could bring up about him, his name was slandered. People said false things to him and about him. They spoke with offensive and inflammatory language. And no amount of kindness or wisdom that he spoke with convinced them to change their attitudes and actions.

While practicing ordinary Christian character, Stephen experienced negativity.

Although on a much smaller scale, we too, might be familiar with this response.

For some of you in this room - your family members and friends have responded negatively to the way you choose to live out your faith in Christ. Family gatherings are now a little awkward or perhaps impossible to even get through. Because your ways of following Jesus that lead to inclusion, community, compassion, and justice are not welcomed by those closest to you.

Others of you have experienced negativity from people online or in person from strangers. People who call you: heretic, abomination, wolf-in-sheep's clothing, someone who leads people astray. All for how you choose to live out your faith in Christ.

Over the last several months, more than a handful of our church's content on social media has invited strangers to comment negatively about our church, about my employment, or about how we can call ourselves Christians. All for how we choose to live out our faith in Christ. For the ways that we try to practice inclusion, community, compassion, and justice.

While practicing ordinary Christian character, we may experience negativity.

But negative responses do not absolve us of the responsibility to continue demonstrating ordinary christian character.

Just because Jordann heard expletives being thrown in her face does not mean she should abandon advocating for those in vulnerable situations.

Just because Stephen's name was being slandered and he was being mocked does not mean he should stop caring for the widows and orphans and proclaiming the ways of Jesus.

Just because we may receive negative comments from family or community members, or negative reviews on the internet does not mean that we should abandon our mission of pursuing inclusion, community, compassion, and justice for all people.

We are called to Christlikeness no matter how people respond.

One of the earliest Christian churches began in Galatia, which is now modern-day Turkey. And the early christians living there experienced incredible negativity. They faced ideological conflict and societal pressure from outside opponents. They were frequently frustrated, tired, and discouraged. So, Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians instructing and encouraging them, saying,

9 So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. 10 So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith. - Galatians 6:9-10 NRSV

Through practicing ordinary Christian character, we may experience negativity. But let us not grow weary of doing what is right.

Negative responses do not absolve us of our responsibility to Christlikeness. The Spirit is at work through ordinary christian character.

Unsuccessful

My friend, Jordann, was ultimately unsuccessful in helping the family lawfully recover their car from the Dallas ICE facility. Although the family brought the car title with them and they were following the rules set forth by the detention center, no amount of conversation with the agents could persuade them to do the right thing.

The family was forced to drive home without their car. Jordann felt defeated. Justice was not carried out.

While practicing ordinary Christian character, Jordann was unsuccessful.

And Stephen was unsuccessful too. Despite being innocent of any technical crimes, his accusers and their lies won the day. Stephen was not able to carry on his task of caring for the poor and preaching the ways of Jesus. Stephen died a horrible death. Justice was not carried out.

While practicing ordinary Christian character, Stephen was unsuccessful.

And perhaps we will be unsuccessful too. We may not solve the housing crisis in our community, or make sure every physical and financial need of every person is met. Our pews may never be full. Our doors might not stay open forever. We might never have enough power, money, or influence to do all the good things we hope to do.

While practicing ordinary Christian character, we may be unsuccessful.

But lack of success does not indicate failure, lack of Christian character does.

Jordann was not successful in providing justice for this family, but throughout the process, she remained kind, calm, and respectful to the officers, and she was able to provide comfort and care to the 2 yr old and to the frustrated parents. She says what brings her hope is the fact that the family will go home knowing that they aren't alone - that there are people willing to help them, to walk with them, to weep with them, to advocate for them.

Stephen was not successful in maintaining his life. But throughout his trial, he maintained his character and integrity, speaking with truth, wisdom, and kindness. And he used his last words as Jesus did - asking that people would be forgiven.

Our church may not be the most successful on paper. We may not have the most people, the most money, the most power, or the most influence. But we can continue to demonstrate ordinary christian character, we can continue to show up for our neighbors and carry ourselves with kindness, expecting that the Spirit is at work. Because our success is not defined by results, but by the character with which we do the ordinary work that Christ has called us to do.

There's a television series I love called, *Ted Lasso*. In it, the main character, Ted, is a happy-go-lucky football coach with an unconventional coaching style, and he is hired to coach a struggling and disconnected soccer team in England. Ted initially faces incredible backlash from the team, the fans, and commentators worldwide because he doesn't seem to take things too seriously and he seems pretty unconcerned about the team's losing streak.

But in an interview with one of his toughest critics, reporter Trent Crimm, he admits something profound. He says, "For me, success is not about the wins and losses. It's about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves, on and off the field."

Through practicing ordinary Christian character, we may not experience success. But success is not about wins and losses. It's about being the best versions of ourselves and the best examples of Christ that we can be.

The Spirit is at work through ordinary christian character.

Response

The work that you do and continue to do, as followers of Christ might not yield the results you hoped for. You may receive negative responses and yield unsuccessful results. But the Spirit is at work when regardless of the responses or results, our Christian character remains.

Have you allowed the negativity, the naysayers, the critics to impact the way you live your Christian faith? Have you become so consumed with the results that you abandon the ways of Christ along the way?

The Spirit is at work through ordinary christian character. Keep Going.