

# Notes for Brian's Sermon at Brentwood Presbyterian Church

Sun, Aug 11, 2019

## Forgiveness for Executioners

(Ps 50 and Acts 7:54–8:1)



Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice,  
“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”  
When he has said this, he died.  
(Acts 7:60)

### Insights from the story within the story

This is one of those “OK, this guy is nuts!” stories – and, as I found myself saying to myself, you might well be thinking, “If this is what the hope and healing are that Christianity offers, I want none of it – forgive executioners – not a chance!!! – but that’s the core message of this story – and it’s part of the intentional parallel between Luke’s telling of Stephen’s execution and that of Jesus – in this powerful painting by Jacques Stella caught my eye this week – my first impression was that Stephen was pleading with his attackers – but then I remembered our text – and saw the presence of God and Moses, with the angel being sent to assure Stephen of their presence with him – then the plea became clear – it’s Stephen appealing to God for forgiveness for his executioners – that’s a tough message to absorb, accept, and apply! – but there it is – and it’s tough to rationalize away – in the day of trouble, God’s deliverance includes forgiving those who are troubling you – that’s what it costs to participate in the reconciling energy of God’s love made so manifest in Jesus Christ

### Provocative points to ponder – as always, too many to cram into one sermon

- Many of you know that we have commissioned the arrangement of a suite of 10 songs composed by Fred Rogers for Mr Roger’s Neighbourhood for our big band, the Brentwood Jazz All-Stars – by Jill Townsend, one of Ben’s teachers and one of Canada’s most distinguished big band leaders, composers, and arrangers – many of you also know that Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister in Pittsburgh – a graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where he studied and became close friends with a leading New Testament scholar by the name of William F Orr – in one of his books, *Living Hope : A Study of the New Testament Theme of Birth from Above* (1989), co-authored with novelist and poet William Guy, Orr explored the dynamics of being drawn into following Jesus, the dynamics that had led Stephen to his death – one of the book notes on this

volume put it this way - "On the basis of their analysis, the authors believe that "birth from above" is not some sudden cataclysmic and definitive alteration in the life of an individual but rather the beginning of a process which takes place in company, and sometimes in conflict, with others, in order that the divine society envisioned by Jesus may come into existence and thus replace the wrangle of warring element into which the world has been fractured. It is a means of bringing peace, which in the deepest Hebrew sense means ultimate well-being, into the world. This purpose of this book is to illuminate the possibility of establishing a world society that understands itself to be the family of God." – but what is the key to following through on that process of replacing the wrangling and the warring?

- In Michael G Long's book on Rogers social theology, *Peaceful Neighbour: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers* (2015), he tells a story about Rogers and his wife visiting Orr in the hospital after a stroke – he asked his mentor what he considered to be the most important word in the New Testament – Orr's answer was "forgive" – a verb – something to be done in faithful response to God's forgiving and reconciling love for us – an unconditional gift so we can be ambassadors of God's peace

### **How does this apply to our mission here at Brentwood?**

Most of the commentators on Acts that I have been reading see the execution of Stephen as a turning point in the narrative flow of the book – from a focus on the Jerusalem church to the Gentile church throughout the Roman Empire - lurking on the edges of this execution and implicated deeply in it is a Jewish enforcer by the name of Saul – we look at his rebirth "from above" in a couple of weeks and his work as the missionary Paul will feature prominently in the Spirit's spread of the church from that point on – the pivoting that happens from this point on is a turn to the Gentile world – that's the world of the enemy, of those who have been demeaned and dismissed by the purists in the Jewish community, of those who have been unfaithful to the rules and rituals of the law and the temple – but in that community, that forgiven community, the church finds fertile soil for its seeds of the peace of God – it is in that reviled and rejected world that the forgiving and broad 'kindom' of God is truly found and nourished to flourish – I'm looking forward to the lessons that we can learn from Luke's account of that shift in focus in his story

### **My Notes**

### **My Prayers**

