**Fourth Sunday in Easter**

**Sermon**

**Text: Acts 6:1-9.7:2a, 51-60**

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus said in the Gospel today; "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." What did he mean? What is a full life? Is it pursuing your dreams? Is it reaching the next level? Is it more money? Is it being all you can be? Is that what Jesus meant? Experiencing what life can offer, achieve your goals, live it up, finishing your "bucket list". It that what he meant? What do you think? Am I living life to the fullest? Especially today? When everything seems to be going south, turned upside down and getting worse!

What was Jesus promising with these words? "**I have come that they may have life and have it to the full”.** Rather than reading our own ideas into them, let God’s word tell us Jesus’ meaning. We can see that in the life of Stephen. Stephen lived life to the full.

You might be saying to yourself just now. “But Pastor, if you look closely at the story you just read, things did not work our very well for Stephen. If fact, it appears that his life ended badly. How can you say he lived life to the full? His life was cut short. And in a very violent way. Yes, that is true. And a very tragic story indeed. But let us not start at the end of the story. Let us go back to the beginning. We will see the Jesus indeed gives us all life…….to the full. We see it in Stephen! It can be ours as well.

**Life to the full! We are filled with the Holy Spirit!**

The News of Easter was amazing. It was the spark that lit the fire of the gospel message. It spread rapidly. In our text for today we see that the church had been growing in Jerusalem. Things seemed to be going well right? They were living the life, the new life in Christ. And having it to the full!

But wait! Would it surprise you to find out that even way back then – in the days of the apostles – so close to the time of Jesus’ resurrection, things were not going so well? There was grumbling and murmuring. Yes even among the believers! **In those days, as the number of disciples was increasing, a complaint arose from the Greek-speaking Jews against the Hebrew-speaking Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.**

Looking at what was happening then, you may see a connection to what we are dealing with today. Where is my stimulus check? Why have I been laid off? Why do I have to stay in! Why can’t I go fishing? Get my hair cut? The grumbling and complaining it there for all to see and especially hear! Yes, even among those who believe who trust in God! Why?

Like you and me, these early Christians still had a sinful nature that got in the way. The devil uses strife, conflict, jealously, and difficult situations to get at us. He wants you to turn away from God. This is nothing new. It goes way back. Listen to what Paul warns us about this in1 Corinthians 10:9-10: **9We should not test the Lord,as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. 10And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.**

Notice what is happening here. There is no great doctrinal controversy, there is no open opposition to the mission of the church, disciples are being added daily we are told. But there is still grumbling, and dissension and people are becoming dissatisfied. Why? It all boils down to the distribution of food. I am not getting my fair share. What about me? How can I live life to the fullest if I am being overlooked, if I don’t get my fair share?

What were the Apostles to do? Were they to take time away from their testifying about Jesus, affirming their eye-witness account, work which Jesus himself had sent them to do? Were they to neglect that work in order to make sure food was divided up fairly? Listen to their answer: **2So the Twelve called together the whole group of disciples and said, “It is not right for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3Brothers, carefully select from among you seven men with good reputations, who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this service. 4But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.”**

**5This proposal pleased the entire group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte from Antioch.**

**6They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.**

Notice these men were full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Leadership in the church, even in the business side of the congregation, requires spiritual wisdom. Stephen had spiritual wisdom. He was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”. We can see from our text that Stephen and his companions lived their life of faith. It produces what Jesus wanted. The conflict was gone. Sins forgiven; life renewed. Jesus the Good Shepherd was leading his sheep through faithful servants. **7The word of God kept on spreading, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly. Also a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.**

 Jesus came so that you, may have life to the full -- a life full of the Holy Spirit. Take his Word to heart. Listen to the words of your Shepherd. Hear his voice calling out from the pages of the Scriptures. He laid down his life. Do you think that his words are going to mislead you? Drink in his promises. These are the green pastures and quiet waters that filled Stephen's heart, mind, and soul that caused his live to show his faith. It overflowed with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and all the fruit of the Spirit. **8Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.**

But the story of Stephen has an ending that is very sad. How this flies in the face of what our society means by a full life! Look at how Stephen's life ended. Rather than reaching the stars, he was thrown into the dust. **9Some men who were from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia) rose up and disputed with Stephen.**

**7:2Stephen said, “Gentlemen, brothers and fathers, listen!**

**51“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit! You are doing just what your fathers did. 52Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who prophesied the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers— 53you who received the law as transmitted by angels, but did not keep it.”**

**54When they heard these things, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed up into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56He said, “Look, I see heaven opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”**

**57But they screamed at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and rushed at him with one purpose in mind. 58They threw him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul.**

**59While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” 60Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” After he said this, he fell asleep.**

No loved ones or family gathered around him, only the hateful screams of his murderers. No peaceful, quiet slipping away, but the brutal pain of stones hurled at him. What hopes, dreams, and goals had he had? They were cut short? His life taken. Not living…….dying! This is a full life? Having it to the full?

But before you give in to those thoughts, look at the last words in the text. **"He fell asleep"**. What hope is in those words and what truth! How different from the empty platitude like "They'll live on in your heart.” But how different: "He fell asleep"! In Jesus death has become only a sleep for the believer. Jesus will wake up his people, his faithful, on the Last Day.

Stephen trusted Jesus. See his faith in Jesus. See it his words. He confessed Jesus as his crucified and risen Savior as he stood before his accusers. Jesus is the Righteous One, the Jesus is the Risen One, ascended to heaven, standing on the right hand of God, ruling over all things. Stephen saw it. Right there. He confessed it for all to hear.

Stephen trusted Jesus. Look at his faith! He prays for his enemies. Even as they hurled the stones at him, he cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them”. How could he forgive those who treated him so brutally? Because he knew how much Jesus had forgiven him.

Stephen trusted Jesus. We can to! "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit", he prayed. So, he fell asleep in Jesus. That's life to the full, life that's ready to fall asleep in Jesus. So no matter what the future holds. Where this all leads. Remember this! Jesus gives you life…life to the full. **Amen**