

3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of Easter “The Choice We Can Make Today”  
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My friends, the Acts of the Apostles give us a good look into the hearts of the earliest Christians. They lived in very difficult times. We are concerned about the coronavirus overwhelming our health care system. Back then, there wasn't a health care system. We are worried about the nation's food supply in the coming weeks, famine was simply part of life in the first century. We are getting grumpy about government restrictions for the common good. They had to live under Roman occupation. It was brutal. For the earliest Christians, they dealt with all of that like everyone else did however they also had to contend with terrible persecutions and the threat of being martyred for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus.

This is where our first reading begins. The earliest Christians are burying Stephen, one the Church's first deacons. Instead of being defeated, it seems like every martyrdom only further galvanized these earliest Christians. That is what happens next in our first reading. It speaks of Saul being a chief persecutor of Stephen. Saul would soon have a dramatic conversion experience and become Saint Paul. It speaks of Christians leaving the scene of Stephen's martyrdom. Far from being defeated, it says they went out preaching the word. It speaks of Philip setting out to proclaim the Gospel. God offers miracles so that the people would listen. What I find inspirational about this reading: It begins horrifically with the aftermath of Stephen's martyrdom and it ends with people rejoicing in the streets thanks to Philip's ministry.

When people hear me talk about defiant joy, you can see it on display in this first reading. The mark of a Christian is joy. These earliest Christians had every reason to despair and yet the exact opposite happens. Why? God gave them the grace they needed, this is true. However, it is also true that these earliest Christians chose the joy of the Gospel despite everything else that was going on. They chose the joy of the Gospel and defiantly lived it.

Today is the feast day of Saint Catherine of Siena who lived in the late 1300's. Life wasn't that much easier during those years either. And yet the office today described her this way, “On fire with love of God and neighbor, she established peace and concord between cities, vigorously fought for the rights and freedom of the Roman Pontiff and promoted the renewal of the religious life.” She was an amazing saint and doctor of the Church in a very difficult chapter of our history.

I mention all of this because even though you and I have some hardships to face today and every day during this pandemic, it is nothing like what the first century Christians had to contend with. We have choices to make too. We can make a list today of all the ways we can be justified into giving into despair....or we can choose Jesus and the defiant joy he offers us, a joy that even the wood of the cross cannot defeat or death itself stamp out.

How do we get there? In our Gospel reading we are continuing the Bread of Life discourse. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” and “this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day.” You see, the Gospel continues to ask us the question, “what do we hunger for most?” I believe most of our joys or sorrows in this life are linked to the answer we have for that specific question...what do we hunger for most? The Gospel suggests that if our answer to that question is truly Jesus, how much happier would our lives be?