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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 3, 2026

5 Easter, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

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In the first half of this week I was up in Washington State where I'd been invited to lead a conference session for a group of clergy. After the session, someone came up to me and asked, "This might sound random, but did you know Louis Weil?" Now Louis was one of the great theologians of the Episcopal Church, and he died a few years ago. And I said—"Yes! Louis was a dear friend and mentor." And she said, "Listening to your presentation, I felt like Louis was back with us in a different form." It was the most wonderful compliment she could have given me.

Now of course I'm not Louis Weil. If I were to try to actually do some kind of Louis impression while leading a session—trying to match his voice or his mannerisms—it would be beyond bizarre, and the teaching would fall flat. But I loved Louis, and he taught me and influenced me a great deal, and I'm passionate about many of the things he was passionate about. I'm proud to stand in his lineage, to carry forward some of his spirit.

Something like that is happening in our reading from Acts this morning, although in a much more dramatic and costly way. Here Jesus is the mentor and Stephen is the disciple following in his footsteps. And what Stephen has learned, has drunk deeply into his soul, is the pattern of Jesus at the cross. His words and actions as he becomes the first Christian martyr are almost exactly those of Jesus. He forgives his killers. He commends his spirit. Stephen has so deeply absorbed the pattern of Jesus' life that it has reproduced itself in him, even at the point of death. That pattern has gotten inside him and is living itself out through him.

Today in our gospel story Jesus says something remarkable to his disciples: "Whoever believes in me will do the things I do and, in fact, will even do greater things than these." Greater things than Jesus? It sounds strange, maybe even a little blasphemous to pious ears. And yet I think part of what Jesus means here is that the work he has done here on earth, through his death and resurrection, is about to be multiplied, like a seed that yields thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Stephen's death is one of those many sprouts—and his faithfulness, his integrity, his forgiveness will continue to fling the good news farther and farther out. We heard a small detail in the story: "They laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." That young man, better known by his Greek name of Paul, will soon himself have a profound encounter with Jesus and will himself start to live out the pattern of Jesus' love, Jesus' integrity, Jesus' faithfulness, Jesus' grace. Paul will carry the good news of the risen Jesus farther than anyone else in that first generation of the church before he himself will be martyred. Stephen never knew that, of course. He died not knowing. But his faithfulness worked in ways he couldn't possibly have seen.

As friends of Jesus, called ourselves to replicate the pattern of Jesus' life in our own way and place and time, our faithfulness too can work in ways we will never know or see.

Jonathan Daniels was an Episcopal seminarian in the early 1960s. He was naturally inclined toward prayer and contemplation, but in March 1965 he felt a call of duty to respond to Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to join the march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama. He ended up staying in Selma, working for voter rights, tutoring children, trying to integrate the local Episcopal church, and studying long-distance so he could still take and pass his semester exams. One summer day, when he and a group of white and black activists had just been released from six days in jail for a protest, a white county deputy named Tom Coleman started yelling threats at them. He pointed his shotgun at a young black woman, seventeen years old, named Ruby Sales. At that moment Jonathan Daniels pushed her out of the way and took the blast just as Coleman fired. He was twenty-six years old. Jonathan Daniels is recognized as a martyr in the Episcopal Church and celebrated with a feast day. Ruby Sales lived on and became a legendary civil rights activist. She's still alive today at age 77 after an illustrious career as a historian and educator.

Now Jesus in his earthly ministry never agitated for voting rights in Selma. He never faced a shotgun, or started an inner-city school, or became a civil-rights educator. Jonathan Daniels and Ruby Sales have each lived out the pattern of Jesus, not by imitating the details of his life, but by being saturated in the pattern of his self-giving love. That was their call—and it's ours.

Not that each of us will be called to be a literal martyr, or even most of us—thanks be to God for that. We should love and celebrate and give thanks for those who have literally suffered in that way for the faith, but we shouldn't glamorize that kind of suffering or seek it out. There's an old Irish tradition that said there were three kinds of martyrdom: red martyrdom, white martyrdom, and green martyrdom. Red martyrdom was dying for one's faith. White martyrdom was leaving everything behind for the sake of the gospel, like the Celtic monks who left their homes, possessions, and everything familiar to strike out in little boats and found monasteries on remote islands. But green martyrdom was the martyrdom of the everyday: the ordinary discipline of repenting one's sins, giving generously, turning away from evil and turning towards Christ.

That's the martyrdom for most of us. Every time we feed our hungry neighbors, every time we show up for someone in need, every time we make a genuine apology, every time we share a free gift out of love, we are living out the pattern of Jesus. The life of Christ alive in us. It may not be dramatic or headline-worthy; or occasionally it might be. It all depends on who we are and where God has placed us. But it's there in each of us: the life of Jesus, still multiplying, still doing greater works, through us, in ways we may never see.