

## The Cost and Joy of Discipleship

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, May 3, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Acts 7:55-60](#)

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I remember my mother telling me, decades ago, that my parents wanted to name me Steven/Stephen (if I turned out to be a boy), but they couldn't agree on the spelling. My father was strongly of the opinion that names should be spelled the way they sound, and when it came to extra letters, leave them out. My sister Sara doesn't have an "h" at the end. My sister Alison has only one "l." Thus, if they named me "Steven," he contended it should be spelled with a "v." My mother wanted the Germanic spelling to tie my name to her (and my) Swiss German heritage. Thus, if they named me "Stephen," she said it should be spelled with a "ph."

They could agree that "Jeffrey" should not be spelled "Geoffrey," and (my father says) my mother liked the name. So they agreed: I would be Jeffrey. I wonder if, had I been named Stephen (or Steven), I would have learned about the story of the martyrdom of Stephen earlier in my life, and I wonder if the story would have played a role in my understanding of my identity.

Stephen was part of a group of seven who were commissioned (perhaps we could even say *ordained*) to respond to an injustice that was happening in the community of followers of Jesus. Greek-speaking, non-Jewish followers of Jesus complained that the Jewish leadership of their community were neglecting the Greek-speaking, non-Jewish widows, that these widows were not getting enough in the daily distribution of food.

The seven are appointed to take care of this injustice. In chapter 6 we read, "Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." He does such a good job dealing with matters within the community, and he does such an impressive job with converting people to become Jesus-followers, (there's nothing the hierarchical principalities and powers hate worse than success of an egalitarian movement) that some non-Jesus-followers arranged for a trumped-up charge of blasphemy to be brought against Stephen. When Stephen is brought before the high priest in Jerusalem, he answers a question with a sermon.

Today's reading from Acts skipped the first 54 verses of chapter 7, to get to the exciting stuff. Like the TV news, our reading focuses on the sensational part of the story – the stoning – and skips over the background. The background is Stephen's sermon and, only because of length, I'm not going to read it to you now. You might want to read it on your own. What Stephen does in his sermon is he retells the Jewish story, repeatedly showing how people, motivated by a myriad of feelings, kept trying to stand in God's way, and how God took the bad things that happened and used them for good. He takes the story all the way to Jesus and his execution and resurrection.

The great theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote, "Stephen's sermon addressed people who resisted the Easter news. They wanted to keep the world the way it had been,

under old management with a certain set of assurances and practices that they treasured. Easter is like that: It initiates an upheaval into every 'business as usual' approach. It exposes us as 'stiff-necked,' stubborn and unresponsive (Acts 7:51). The reaction to Stephen's preaching is that he is stoned to death, punishment fit for a blasphemer.

"The remarkable turn of the narrative is Stephen's response to the violence enacted against him. He imitates Jesus on the cross with his petition that God should forgive them (verse 60; Luke 23:34). Stephen's response is in keeping with the Friday-Sunday story of Jesus that does not give in to the power of death."<sup>1</sup>

Joy Moore says, "Like Stephen in his day, 21st century Christians must also be biblically literate in our context. We must learn again that those who bear witness to God's presence cannot only be preachers. Regardless of vocation, *every* believer should be fluent in how Jesus' death and resurrection figure into their [personal] practice in the world. And like the first century audiences, we must understand this might cost us our position, if not life."<sup>2</sup>

I think this is especially true during this time when Christian identity is being stolen by Christo-Nationalism in the United States. We need to be able to articulate what it is about our beliefs and our experiences as followers of Jesus that makes us embrace values that Christo-Nationalists don't. What is it about Jesus that makes you value empathy and compassion? What is it about Jesus that makes you believe that our economy should bring equity, not an every-increasing wage and wealth gap? What is it about Jesus that makes you believe that vulnerable should be protected, not exploited? What is it about Jesus that makes following him look like seeking justice, peace, and inclusion, that makes you value and affirm diversity in our complicated world?

When my dad and stepmom decided to move into a retirement community a couple decades ago, they picked one in New Hampshire. They picked one that matched their personalities, where they sensed they could be themselves and be at home. Pat, my stepmom, did have one complaint. This move meant they would need to re-register their cars in New Hampshire, and that would mean they would get New Hampshire license plates. And Pat really didn't like the state motto that's printed on the license plates: "Live Free or Die."

The phrase was adopted from a toast written by General John Stark, New Hampshire's most famous soldier of the American Revolutionary War. Some people love the motto, claiming it conveys the assertive independence traditionally found in American political philosophy. It is a sentiment that echoes Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death." I think my stepmom found the motto to be too militaristic and that it treated the gift of life too cavalierly. I suggested that, if the state motto truly meant the state supported individual freedom, she should be free to cover the motto with some tape. She didn't take me up on my solution.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Under New Management," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/under-new-management> (accessed 2 May 2026).

<sup>2</sup> Joy J. Moore, "Speaking with Purpose," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/speaking-purpose> (accessed 2 May 2026).

This memory came up because John Stark's toast and Patrick Henry's demand seem to life up patriotic martyrdom. This honoring of patriot martyrdom echoes or rhymes with that value Christianity has put on faithful martyrdom over the centuries. Stephen is seen as the first martyr to the faith.

When I think of 20th century Christian martyrs, I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Oscar Romero. None of them sought martyrdom. All of them accepted that this was a potential cost of discipleship.

Bonhoeffer saw Nazism as a counter-religion and a danger to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> He became an active participant in the dispute which broke out in the Protestant churches between those who sympathized with Nazism and those who (like Bonhoeffer) sensed that the new politics threatened the integrity of the church. He ran an illegal seminary for what he and others called the "Confessing Church." It was shut down by the Nazi security police in October 1937. Bonhoeffer believed that true discipleship came to demand political resistance to the Nazi criminal state. He wrote that the Christian must live maturely and responsibly in the world, and live by God's grace, not by political ideology. In March 1943 he was arrested and incarcerated and two years later, on April 9, 1945, he was executed – only a month before the end of the war.

King's prophetic vision combined an explicitly Christian language of freedom and justice with an appeal to American democracy.<sup>4</sup> Peaceful protests affirmed the dignity of African-Americans and embarrassed their oppressors before the eyes of the world. Knowing that violence bred violence and that Christians are called to respond to hate with love, King adopted a nonviolent approach to his civil right work that was essentially Gandhian. He was killed, murdered, because this disciplined faithfulness was effective.

Oscar Romero was a Catholic priest in El Salvador.<sup>5</sup> Seen as a conservative, both in his theology and temperament, Romero became a bishop in a rural diocese at age 57. He became archbishop of San Salvador three years later. In the same month he was made archbishop, a crowd of protesters were attacked by soldiers in the town square. The next month, a priest he knew was murdered. He noticed that there was no official inquiry into the murder. He recognized that power lay in the hands of violent men, and that they murdered with impunity. The wealthy sanctioned the violence that maintained them.

More and more, Romero committed himself to the poor and the persecuted, and he became the catalyst for radical moral prophecy in the church and outside it. On March 24, 1980, he was shot dead while celebrating mass in the chapel of the hospital where he lived. He once said, "I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people."

While I don't believe that the story of the martyrdom of Stephen, nor the stories of the martyrdoms of Bonhoeffer, King, or Romero, are a command to be a martyr, their

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<sup>3</sup> "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Westminster Abbey*, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/dietrich-bonhoeffer> (accessed 2 May 2026).

<sup>4</sup> "Martin Luther King Jr.," *Westminster Abbey*, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/martin-luther-king-jr> (accessed 2 May 2026).

<sup>5</sup> "St. Oscar Romero," *Westminster Abbey*, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/st-oscar-romero> (accessed 2 May 2026).

stories do remind us that there is a cost to our discipleship. And while I do not believe that the purpose of our faith is to piss people off, I know that living faithfully will make some people angry, even violently angry.

There is a cost to our discipleship. In fact, on rare occasions the risks of discipleship might lead to death. More often the cost of discipleship will be to risk things like our societal status, our wealth, or our power. Risking for our faith should be within reach of every one of us. In fact, if your discipleship has had no cost, what does that say about the nature of your faith?

Now, before you get depressed about this, let me add that there is a joy in discipleship as well. Yvonne Delk once wrote, “The journey that we take from betrayal and death to resurrection and new life is a search for community, spiritual vision, and the reconstruction of a new humanity, our own included. To follow Christ is to recognize that we are not captive to the old order; that we are not surrogates of systems that are not working; and that we are not authored by credentials, achievements, or possessions. Rather, to follow Christ is to embrace the path that offers compassion, vulnerability, justice, covenants, and relationships.”<sup>6</sup>

She notes that there is a freedom that comes with discipleship. We are freed from our “limited perception of things,” and that allows us to break free from the idolatries of “militarism, nationalism, and materialism.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the joy of the freedom brings with it the cost of discipleship. Those who choose to follow Jesus “will always be in trouble with the authorities.”<sup>8</sup>

The cost and joy of discipleship go hand-in-hand. “As Stephen is about to be killed, he says, ‘Look, I see the heavens opened and the Human Being standing at the right hand of God!’ Jesus is standing, not sitting,” notes Jim Douglass, “so as to welcome the dying Stephen into his presence. The crucified Human Being is at the right hand of God, where Stephen will soon join him.”<sup>9</sup>

May we embrace the joy of discipleship we find in “community, spiritual vision, and the reconstruction of a new humanity, our own included,” even as we accept the cost of discipleship.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Yvonne V. Delk, “Beyond Believing,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/beyond-believing> (accessed 2 May 2026).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Jim Douglass, “A Dangerous Formula,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/dangerous-formula> (accessed 2 May 2026).