

Sermon May 14, 2017 - Easter 5

When Hill Blocks View

Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60



Introduction:

Having grown up in the mountain of western Guatemala, I was used to hills and even mountains obstructing the view of things I sometimes wanted to see. Imagine, then, my surprise when I saw this picture on the screen, especially when the sign is on a relatively flat, rural area, and a reduced speed limit. The hill is barely discernible, if there is one! There must be a hill somewhere where we can't see it, so this sign is necessary to alert the traveler to unseen dangers on the road ahead.

Just as the beauty of hills and mountains can distract our attention from what is immediately in front of us as we travel on the roads, so the things of this world block our view of God's kingdom.

Today on this mother's day, we will focus our meditation on Acts chapter 6 where we see the account of the martyrdom of Stephen, who despite being stoned to death, the Holy Spirit helped him to see God in his kingdom.

I. Hills block our view of God's kingdom on earth.

In this reading we also see two hills that were blocking people's views of God's kingdom.

The hill has to do with church growth, although it was a good problem I would say, still it was blocking the view of God's kingdom and threatening the apostles preaching of that Kingdom of grace.

Here the Hellenists or the Greek-speaking Christian Jews, who return to settle in Jerusalem, complained that their widows weren't being treated justly as the other widows were. Blocking hills begin with very simple things, like the daily physical needs of the fairly new Christian congregation in Jerusalem; physical needs that can lead people to focus on material things and not God's word.

A very tough position to be in, but God has plan for everything and so the Holy Spirit provided seven men, of whom Stephen was one, to attend to the physical needs of the congregation so that the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and preaching the Word as well as administering the sacraments. (6:3–6).

Now, that doesn't mean that serving those in need were not important, on the contrary, it was part of the entire ministry of the Church. However all needs to be done in such a way that the entire congregation becomes part of the Ministry of the Church and all areas according to their needs, having the Preaching of God's word as the primary focus of the Church. And when Ministry is done as God wills, then God will provide the resources, and those resources by the power of the Holy Spirit, will bring about fruits for God's glory.

Stephen was given the Holy Spirit, and he in turn obeyed the Spirit's direction and calling to do his work, so he was able to proclaim God's word through miracles and

signs. Stephen allowed the Holy Spirit to use him to run free and freely give testimony of God's power, overcoming any hill that was blocking his view of God's kingdom.

So, today, what hill or hills do you have in your way that blocks your view?

The second and most serious hill that was blocking people's view of God's kingdom in Jerusalem was religious tradition. Religious tradition can be very difficult to see and overcome. Our text for today explains how the religious people went as far as stoning Stephen to death because he was preaching God's truth.

The reality is that when people focus on religious tradition only, they might actually close the door to the Holy Spirit. Just look at the Jews who opposed Stephen's ministry, they opposed the work of the Holy Spirit. Stephen actually says that their minds and hearts were closed shut to the Holy Spirit, that ultimately they betrayed Jesus, crucifying Him. And when they heard the truth from Stephen, they didn't like, instead they "...were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him." (Acts 7:54)

Why? Because of the hills they erected before their own eyes—they lacked faith in the Son of Man (Acts 6:9). They had stopped the Holy Spirit from working in them; they couldn't see who Jesus was, and why he had come. Hills that block our view of God's kingdom can be dangerous and detrimental to our faith.

So, today, what hill or hills do you have in your way that blocks your view?

Just like in the newly formed church in Jerusalem we do have hills that block our view of God's kingdom of grace. For starters our own physical needs.

For example, caring for our children's physical needs can block our view of their spiritual needs. What? Do you mean Church is more important than their needs? If Church is the New Jerusalem in our midst, then yes. But if church is part of our religious tradition only, then, might not be as important, but then again, religious tradition will get us nowhere, but the Holy Spirit will, through Word and Sacrament, will!

Have you noticed that we usually put off family prayer and devotion time with our children, because there are more "important" things to be done? We feel that since they learn the Bible in Sunday school, we don't have to teach them God's Word at home. But, the problem is that we see Sunday school also as secondary to anything else.

Today is Mother's day. Happy mother's day to all Mothers here gathered! We wouldn't forget you today. The fourth Commandment reminds to honor our parents, and certainly on this day we do honor you! May you be blessed! May your vocation of motherhood be honored by your loved ones!

Now, as special as this day is, the vocation of a Mother also poses in itself hills that block the view of God's Kingdom. Mothers are always busy with their children, right? You make sure they are fed, you make sure they attend school; look after the house, on top of that go to work. Mothers are busy all the time. And among the hectic schedule or list of things you have to do, seldom there is time for prayer and reading of God's work. O sure you do a small devotion, but seldom to edify you in the Spirit. Some prayers can be said throughout the day, but at the end of the day, a day passed and God's kingdom of grace sometimes is out of the picture altogether, you remember perhaps that yes, is there, but it is hard to see the whole picture because of the everyday hills that block your view.

But there is more. You know after you have done all you had to for your children, they will remember to say thank you only on Mother's day, but the rest of the year, well, they take you for granted. That can potentially block your view of God's kingdom too.

And that hill comes in the way of resentment because of ungratefulness, which causes pain, and pain causes bitterness, and bitterness causes unforgiveness that prevent from seeing God's forgiveness actively in the life of the person.

And there is more, sometimes after you have done all you can so that your children stay in the ways of God, you brought them to church weekly, you brought them to baptism, Sunday school, confirmation, with your husband you trained your children in the way they should go, as Proverbs 22 says. But now that they are old, some of them have departed from the church and faith.

That can cause you pain and sadness even lead to think of yourself as a failure. Not only your children don't attend church, but your grandchildren are growing unbaptized, untaught, with little or no knowledge of God and what He's done for us in Christ.

And you wonder where did you go wrong as parents? How did you fail? Those thoughts can distract us from God's Kingdom of grace.

Now, what other hills are there in your way that blocks your view of God's Kingdom?

II. The Holy Spirit keeps us focused on the glory of heaven.

Now, whatever hills you have, hear the Good News: any hill blocking your view, can be leveled down. It is God's work through the Holy Spirit! Something happens when you are led by the Holy Spirit.

See what happened to Stephen, he sees God's glory. This is what the text says: "But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 6:55-56)

There is good news for you Mothers; in fact there is good news for everybody. And the Good news is that the Holy Spirit keeps us focused on the glory of heaven. See it happening in Stephen, even when he was dying even in the midst of violence he saw God's glory. The stoning he was getting because of the rage of the religious leaders mob, could have blocked his view of God's loving care for him.

But something happened, Stephen did not shut the Holy Spirit out, instead let Him do His way with Him, and allowed Stephen a view of heaven and sees the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, standing at the right hand of God (7:55-56). With that assurance, even with stones flying at him, Stephen is able to commend his spirit to the Lord (7:59) and to pray, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60).

I wish we too can have that privilege of seen God's glory. Maybe we can, in fact we can. For the Holy Spirit is willing to grant us a view of the glory of heaven, though hidden under earthly things, if we let the Holy Spirit have His way with us, through God's word and the sacraments.

And believe me, the Spirit is working hard, even when worldly activities block our view of God's kingdom, the Spirit is pleading with us to let Him work within us, so he can show us through freedom and God's glory.

The Holy Spirit is constantly preaching Christ both to parents who neglect to teach their children and to the children themselves who have abandon the faith.

It is the Holy Spirit who reveals to you that even when your children have wandered away, the Holy Spirit is still working with them, and reminds us that even when we are faithless God remains faithful, rescuing us back to him.

And more, the Holy Spirit wants to lead you in your Christian life to make an impact in the life of those around you, to make you a faithful witness. To encourage those who have left the church to see in you that fidelity that at one point or another, the Spirit is going to work in the life of those children. Continue praying for them, be an example for them.

The Holy Spirit will lead you to God's kingdom of grace, God's grace that will sustain and heal both parents and children. God's grace in Christ is not only for your children; it is for you, too. God's grace that comes in the person of Jesus his Son, He is the way, the life and the truth!

The Spirit reveals to us God's kingdom by revealing to us Jesus Christ. He died on a hill thereby destroying our mistakes, our failures, there on the cross, so that we become in Him exactly as the Father wants us to be.

Dear friends, what hills do you have blocking your view of God's Kingdom of grace? Confess them to God, God will give you His spirit, pray for the Holy Spirit, so that he will lead you to see past beyond those hills and reveal to you his Kingdom, for his kingdom is here for you, is here to heal and strengthen you.

In his name, amen.