

A New Thing

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for April 20, 2008

Lessons for Easter 5 in Year A

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

I worked at McDonald's back when I was in high school, and I remember when the Quarter Pounder was first introduced back in 1973.

Say what you will about the huge portion sizes that fast food places offer us these days, a regular McDonald's hamburger was, and is tiny compared to at least what my family made at home. Our homemade burgers were much closer to the size of a Quarter Pounder.

As part of the promotion for the new product, we were supposed to "suggestive sell," and if you've ever seen the movie "Supersize Me," you know what that's all about. When a person asks for fries, you ask if that'll be a large. You try to move them up one price point on one item that they've ordered. In this case, if a person asked for a hamburger, we were suppose to ask if they'd like to try a Quarter Pounder.

And to give us more incentive to do this, McOpCo, the local McDonald's Operating Company, sent out a series of "Secret Shoppers" to check on you. If they came to your store, got in your register line, and you suggestive sold them a Quarter Pounder, you got \$20 on the spot. That was pretty good incentive.

Of course, if they came to your register and you didn't suggestive sell them, they revealed their identity to you and your manager, made a report to the main office, and you felt like crap.

And so it came to pass that one night, as I was working in the grill area, we heard a huge commotion up front. A woman was loudly giving Shelly, one of our cashiers a piece of her mind.

"I am so sick and tired of this! Every time I come here you try to get me to buy something more expensive! No, I don't want a Quarter Pounder! If I wanted a Quarter Pounder, I would've asked for a Quarter Pounder! I just wanted a simple hamburger and fries! I'm never coming here again!" And then she stormed out. Probably going up the road to Burger King, where they wouldn't try to sell her a Whopper.

The whole restaurant just stopped. The rest of the customers turned and stared, the rest of the cashiers froze, and Mr Carrillo, the manager ran up front to see what was going on. Shelly was visibly shaken by the whole thing. No one had ever yelled at her like that in public before. In fact,

none of us had ever seen another cashier treated like that until that moment.

Mr Carrillo tried to calm Shelly down, and asked if she wanted to take a break, but she insisted that she was OK, and went to take the next customer.

You already know what happened. The next woman asked for a cheeseburger and fries, and Shelly, having just been burned by the previous customer didn't suggest to sell the Quarter Pounder. You'd have to be either really stupid or have nerves of steel to do that.

And this woman was the Secret Shopper.

I look at the New Testament, and especially today's lesson from Acts, and I feel sorry for the Jews. To be sure, Stephen didn't have it too good either. But I really feel sorry for the Jews. It's Shelly and the Secret Shopper all over again.

What do I mean? Well, for centuries the Jews had been getting it wrong. Starting with the Golden Calf they followed false god after false god, and every time they did it, God came down hard on them in one way or another. Just when it looks like they've finally learned their lesson, and have decided that they're not gonna make that mistake ever again, in comes Jesus, the ultimate Secret Shopper, and they blow it because they've been burned before, and they're not gonna be fooled again.

Traditionally, in these lessons the Jews have been painted as the bad guys, as the people who knew that Jesus was the real deal, but refused to accept him because of either jealousy or stubbornness. But I don't buy that version. And I don't buy it because I can't believe that anyone's that stupid. I'm a teacher, my stock and trade is stupidity.

Stupidity in others is job security for me, and quite frankly, I can't believe that anyone would knowingly face off against God and think that they'd win. This same thing bugs me about the story of King Herod and the slaughter of the innocents, but maybe I'll get to deal with that some other time.

No, if you think about it, the Jews in the New Testament, and especially in this story, are a lot like us. In fact, they're a lot like the way we often think we should be.

The Jews in this story were being faithful to God as they understood him, and as they had been taught about him.

The rules were quite clear. According to Leviticus 24, the penalty for blasphemy was stoning, and according to everything they had been taught Stephen was guilty of blasphemy, and thus deserved to be stoned. And as they dragged him out of the city to be stoned they covered their ears so that they wouldn't have to hear any more of it.

We know, because we're outside of that story, that the Jews here were wrong. We know that Stephen wasn't blaspheming, but was telling them something new that God was doing. Something that wasn't all that clear from their previous interpretations of the Law and the Prophets. But they weren't prepared for this, and as a result this new thing that God was doing, and for reasons known only to him, chose not to make clear to them, sounded like blasphemy. As a result, to prove their loyalty to God, they stoned Stephen - who perhaps understanding that these guys' hearts were in the right place, asked God not to hold this against them.

We know that the Jews here were wrong because we're outside of the story and have

the luxury of looking at it from a much different angle. But what about the story that we're in. In our story we can only see the individual dots, and not the big picture that they make up. And in our story we often make the same mistake that the Jews made with Stephen. We confuse the way God has done things before with the way he may choose to do things now and in the future, and when we hear something new that someone claims God is doing, our first reaction is usually to cover our ears and argue why this person is so obviously wrong. We vigorously resist anything that doesn't square with the way we've always understood certain parts of the Bible.

We're quick to see the problem when it applies to someone else, but incredibly dense when it comes to ourselves. And even after having said all this today, I'm certain that a fair number of us will leave here still clinging to the idea that the way we've always believed God worked in the past is the way he will, is the way he has to, work now and in the future. As if we could tell God what he had to do.

At the very least here, if it's not always easy for us to accept and understand the new things that God might be doing, once we thought we finally understood the rules, we ought to be able to cut the Jews in this story a little slack, understanding how much like us they were.

But all that having been said, I have to admit that one little thing bugs me about this story. That Saul guy. The one who approved the whole stoning thing. We know what happens to him later on, he literally sees the light on the road to Damascus and goes from being a fierce persecutor of the new

Christians to being the one who helps spread Christianity outside of its Jewish roots.

Why was he shown the light and not also the other Jewish authorities who were trying to stamp out this new movement? And more to the point of this story, why wasn't he shown the light in time to save Stephen's life? Why did God let these people think they were doing the right thing by stoning Stephen, and why does he continually let us continue to do horrible things in his name, when a little correction would seem to go a long way?

Ah, but this is what Pastor Paul calls "Keith's pet question," and it's one that I've been asking a lot since September of 2001.

Going back to the McDonald's on Northfield Road 35 years ago, the Secret Shopper was really apologetic about the whole thing. It wasn't a set-up, just a rather unfortunate set of coincidental events. But Shelly still didn't get the \$20. At least not from the Secret Shopper. For some reason, I keep thinking that Mr Carrillo gave her \$20 out of his own pocket, for the job of suggestive selling she had done up to that point.

I also keep thinking that it was just an unfortunate set of coincidental events that led to Jesus arriving on the scene at the exact same time that the Jews had finally learned their lesson about following each new guy who showed up in town; and that Stephen, like Jesus before him, forgave his killers, knowing that their hearts were at least in the right place.

The Jews of Jesus's time seemed to limit God's active work among them to what we would call the Old Testament era. We Christians seem to make a similar mistake,

thinking that *God's* active work among us ended with the close of the New Testament era. And yet the Christians of the New Testament era were always expecting *God* to do a new thing, while we seem hardwired and locked into the old.

But *God* is always doing a new thing among us. This is the news of Stephen, which the

Jews missed, and that we're often in danger of missing too.

God is doing a new thing, and we should rejoice in it, rather than resisting it.

This is most certainly true.