

DISCOVER CARING

Acts 6: 1-8

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This church has been a Stephen Ministry congregation for over 30 years. When I first came to the church, it was made abundantly clear to me that I was expected to go to Stephen Ministry Leader training so that I could understand more about how this program worked and help it succeed. My second summer here, Hugh Meabon and I traveled together to San Diego for a week-long leader's training. It was an excellent week, both a learning experience and a spiritually rich time. Our Stephen Ministers have all found out, whether they have completed the first 50 hour training or have been to week-long Leader's Training, that Stephen Ministry is a program meant to enrich the head and the heart. Stephen Ministers learn to care by caring for one another. In Stephen Ministry training you are given prayer partners. You learn to pray for others. And in order to do that, and to let someone pray for you, you learn to be vulnerable. You learn to talk to others about your life, about your needs, your fears, your worries.

I am glad that I was encouraged to go to Stephen Minister Leader's Training. Ever since, I have been a huge cheerleader for this program. Stephen Minister helps our congregation become more caring. It is one part of what our parish nurse, Cheryl Updegraff, calls our caring ministries. These networks or webs of caring are essential to who we are in the church. Some parts of the web are informal, some are formal. I believe that the more we care for each other within the church the better able we are to care for people outside the church. The two go together. We become stronger as individuals and as a group, and then we are better equipped to meet the needs of a hurting world.

As we heard in our scripture reading, Stephen Ministry was named for the apostle Stephen, called in the early church to provide caring ministry to those in need. The training our Stephen Ministers receive is primarily in three areas. First is confidentiality. Stephen Ministers do not ever discuss among themselves who it is that they are working with. Sometimes, one of our care receivers will talk about how grateful they are for their Stephen Minister but the Stephen Ministers themselves keep complete confidence. They also receive training in listening skills. You may think that we all naturally know how to listen, but as I say to couples in premarital counseling, listening is becoming a lost art in our culture. So often our conversations take place in the midst of multiple distractions: we try to listen to what a friend or family member is saying but we also are aware of the presence of the TV, the computer, the phone, the radio. Or, while someone else is talking, we shut down because we are focused on what we are going to say next. Real, focused listening is a skill, and it's one our Stephen Ministers practice. Finally, Stephen Ministers learn about all of the kinds of situations they may confront. People ask for a Stephen Minister when they're grieving, after a death or another kind of loss. Stephen Ministers learn about depression, divorce, serious illness, the grief journey. They learn when to refer, because sometimes professional help is needed instead of or in addition to the care of a Stephen Minister. They learn to pray for and with their care receivers.

I want to encourage you to be mindful of this program, and to not hesitate to ask for a Stephen Minister if you are going through a life transition. There are times in all of our lives when a listening ear is helpful. Maybe you're experiencing the empty nest for the first time and just need someone to talk to about how that feels. Or maybe you feel a little lost during your first year of retirement. Life can overwhelm us, and in those times, it helps to talk.

One of the Stephen Ministry mottos is “We Care. God Cures.” Stephen Ministers are not here to fix problems. Some problems don’t have a solution. But it always helps to know that you’re not alone. Caring makes a real difference and can strengthen us to face challenges with greater courage and confidence.

I could spend the rest of the morning telling you stories of people who have been helped immeasurably by the Stephen Ministry program in this church. But instead, let me just say how grateful I am for all of those who have been trained through the years, those who are currently active and those who were active in the past. I know that you never completely retire from Stephen Ministry!

I have been thinking about this emphasis on caring, and I’ve come to the conclusion that it is more important than ever for this one reason: the pace of our lives. When life speeds up, some things get left behind, and one of those things sometimes is caring. Do you think it’s possible that in our society we have become too busy to care for each other?

I’m sure some of you heard the story on National Public Radio last week about the new status symbol among certain ultra-wealthy people. Instead of showing off their private beach in the South Pacific, or their super expensive car, they are now bragging on social media about how busy they are. Yes, those who used to be called the idle class or the leisure class are now boasting to one another about how full their schedules have become.

Whether we’re rich or poor, or somewhere in between, this has become the mantra of our time and place. Ask someone how they are and they will reply with these words: “I’m so busy.” There is a price to pay for constant busy-ness. We see it in our health, we see it in the way we long for more peace of mind, we see it in the ways we try

to find that peace using short-cuts like one too many cocktails at the end of the day. Often it is the case that the more life speeds up, the more we feel hurt, frightened, and isolated.

Listen to a quote from a book entitled Sabbath:

It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: "I am so busy." We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves, and we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single, mindful breath, this has become the model of a successful life.

The United States has always been known as a place where work is highly valued; we owe that to our Puritan ancestors and their Protestant work ethic. We take fewer vacations than people in most (if not all) other nations. Now the culture of busy-ness has become adopted by not just adults but children and youth. Like most trends, it's not all bad. There are advantages and disadvantages to leading full and busy lives.

From time to time, it's a good practice for all of us to assess our lives and our relationships and ask ourselves if we are making time for the things that matter most to us. In a world that values busy-ness, when are we too busy? In a culture that values independence, when do we acknowledge our vulnerability, our need for each other? In a society that values competition, where does caring fit in? After all, what does caring help us win? Caring doesn't earn us any money or prizes.

It was at Stephen Ministry training that I heard this story for the first time. It's probably over-used but I don't know any other story that conveys the message quite so

well. The story goes that a little boy was frightened one night by a storm. He called for his mother, and three times she went into his room to comfort him. Tired, and a little frustrated, the third time before she left his room, she said to him, summoning up kindness and patience in her voice, "Honey, I'm just in the next room, and you know God is right here. God is always with you." Her little boy looked at her and said, "I know, Mommy, but sometimes I need God with skin on."

We know, intellectually, that God is with us as we face the challenges of our lives. But we need, don't we, to FEEL that love sometimes in real, tangible ways? We need the reassurance of God's presence that comes from picking up the phone and knowing that a caring person will answer. We need the reassurance that comes from knowing that we have someone in our lives who will listen to us, without distraction and without judgment. Relationships like that take time. They can't always be squeezed in.

It is so easy to become caught up in the values of this world. To think that we constantly need to achieve more, buy more, save more, accumulate more. But at the end of our lives, it won't matter at all that we lived life with full calendars or that we owned 100 different cars. What will matter is the quality of our relationships.

In her new book, Anne Lamott writes this: "Kindness toward others and radical kindness to ourselves buy us a shot at a warm and generous heart, which is the greatest prize of all."

Our Stephen Ministers have pledged their time to the ministry of caring. May their presence among us be a reminder that we never want to be too busy to care.