

Acts 6; 7:51-60
The Heart of a Servant
Sunday September 17th, 2017

Wow, what a story! A waiter became a witness; so his witness could grow larger, and some preachers quit waiting; so they could keep praying and preaching. This is the story of St. Stephen the first Christian martyr.

Today on Stephen Ministry Sunday I thought it appropriate to talk about the namesake for this ministry that touches the lives of so many people in the name of Christ here in this church and churches all across America.

You heard the story. The early church was growing so fast they couldn't keep up with the care of the widows. Those from a Greek speaking background were complaining they were being overlooked in favor of the Hebrew speaking widows.

Scholars don't think this was a case of prejudice or malice of one group within the church over another, but simply logistics complicated by language differences. Taking care of the tables was eating the time of the 12 apostles, distracting them from their duties of prayer, preparation and preaching the word.

Dr. Barclay believes what was going on was the early church took over the routine custom of the synagogue for taking care of the less fortunate. On Friday, the evening of which the Sabbath began, the Jews took up two offerings.

“Two collectors went around the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy, partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day, this was distributed.

Those who were temporarily in need received enough to enable them to carry on; and those who were permanently unable to support themselves received enough for fourteen meals, that is, enough for two meals a day for the week ahead.

The fund from which this distribution was made was called the “Kuppah”, or basket. In addition to this a house-to-house collection was made daily for those whose needs were more pressing. This was called the “Tamui”, or tray.”

So as you can see the “passing of the basket” is an old tradition with people of faith. In fact, you have probably heard we have sent UMCOR \$10,400 for hurricane relief and that provides for immediate and long term relief for those hurt by hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

What the disciples were doing in our scripture was the delegation of some of the administrative duties of the 12 Apostles, but this charitable work was of such importance that the resume of those selected had to be persons who were, “full of the Spirit and wisdom” and Stephen is listed first, as a person who was, “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit;...”

Stephen’s name in Greek means “Crowned” and he certainly was crowned with the glory of Christ, who he saw as actually standing for him in heaven next to God the Father.



Note: Jesus wasn’t sitting in judgement on the judgement seat, but standing to greet the first person to follow Jesus’ example of martyrdom.

In Hebrew the name “Stephen” means “the norm”. In the early church, as today, we need to work towards it always being the norm that all of us have the heart of a servant to serve in the most humble of circumstance be it serving tables or scrubbing toilets.

I remember as a young adult watching the Rev. Dr. Robert Hasley on his knees scrubbing toilets after our Young Adult ski retreat was over in preparation for leaving the church we were staying in. His humble service left a lasting impression on me as a Young Adult.

But just like the Rev. Dr. Robert Hasley and Stephen we need to have a firm enough grasp on our faith that when push comes to shove we can defend it. We need to be “**always ready to defend the hope that we have within us**” as the Bible says.”

The administrative part of the church can overwhelm a pastor, which is why we have so many Committees, Task forces and groups that take on these duties. It is also why at this time of the year our Nominations and Leadership Committee is meeting to review all of our committees and task forces to make sure everyone wants to serve where they are serving and the best leadership for the church is in place for the coming year.

The Nominations and Leadership committee is doing what you see in our story today. It is what Christians have done since the beginning of the church as an institution, and that is going to the body to pick those who will serve, vote them in, and in a real sense ordain them for their task for a season.

Speaking of Nominations... we need people to fill the following position of Lay Member to Annual Conference. Jim Bleess would like to step down from that role to attend to other church duties. And we need someone to organize the welcome booth, because Berny Kinney is moving in January. See me later if you feel called to serve in either of these places.

The pastoral side of a Pastor/Preacher job needs caring hearts too. I have more people to care for here in a pastoral way than I can cover. We have over 300 members and about 200 constituents, and as you know, many spend a lot of time in hospitals, rehabs and at home mending. I, and every pastor I have ever met, has needed help with the pastoral side of minister, the “helping people in time of need” side of ministry.

Pastors need help from people with Hearts of a Servant, hearts that care. If we pastors don't have the help, we either can collapse under the load, or many people's needs go unmet.

As Jethro said to Moses, “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out.

The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.” Exodus 18:17-18

“Dr. Kenneth C. Haugk, founder and Executive Director of Stephen Ministries, describes the beginnings of Stephen Ministry and the Stephen Ministries organization:

“It was 1974. I was fresh out of seminary and graduate school in clinical psychology, I had high hopes for providing pastoral care to people in my congregation and community. That’s where my gifts were. That’s why I felt called to the pastoral ministry—to bring Christ’s love to hurting people.

But reality quickly set in. There were so many needs and only one of me. And only so many available hours in a day. I had a church full of needs, but also a church full of people. So the solution was obvious: “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12 NRSV). Stephen Ministry was born.”

Stephen Ministers at Vista Church are involved in a number of caring ministries.

First, many of them have a single care receiver they help through the rough patches in life by listening and being the presence of Christ with them.

Second, some visit our homebound and take them Holy Communion once a month.

Third, some visit in the hospital and sit with loved ones while a person is in surgery. At the Judgement seat Jesus will say to them, “I was sick and you visited me.

Fourth, they are available on a rotating basis for prayer and listening following our worship services.

Fifth, they help with Holy Communion.

Sixth, there is a Stephen minister available at all of our memorial services.

Seventh, they help on occasion to pray with people at healing services.

Eighth, and probably most importantly of all, they are taught how to point people to Christ for the healing of body and of soul.

Now none do all of these things, but they are trained to serve in them all. We each have our gifts. Your ordination to do these types of ministry, in one sense came at your baptism, but when trained we will again have a “laying on of hands” to confirm your calling and ministry.

Now we all need more training to do ministry in a better more caring manner. To become a Stephen minister you need to take 50 hours of training that we are fortunate enough to have occurring right here in Catalina. If you never know what to say to a hurting person and want to know what to say or do than this training is for you. I highly encourage you to step alongside me as your Pastor and extend the pastoral ministry in a deeper wider manner to our congregation.

Now I don't believe you will be martyred for your ministry like St. Stephen was, but I believe you will receive more power and training for good than you can imagine. St. Stephen thought he was being ordained for the ministry of a waiter. What he received in that ordination, that laying on of hands by the apostles, was the Holy Spirit power to be a powerful witness for God.

He had a rather short career as a waiter, and as an Evangelist. Only one of his sermons was recorded in Acts 7 and that got him killed.



But as he died, Saul who later became Paul witnessed and approved of his killing, a participation and assent he was later to deeply regret. But Paul's participation in St. Stephen's murder, essentially a lynching, led later to a deep conviction of sin, and I believe partly to his conversion.

I want to show you the good you can do as a Stephen Minister, and also the good you can receive as we watch the witness of a man who is a care receiver. His wife was grievously injured, and as in many cases, her illness and suffering have drug on for years, but so has God's love and care for this man through a Stephen Minister.

ROLL "I CAN TELL HIM ANYTHING"

You, through training and experience, can be that effective in blessing another person's life. And if you are in a place of suffering help is available for you.

I invite Karen Rice to come forward and tell a bit more about how you can become involved.



KAREN SPEAKS.

What is God saying to you? What are you going to do?
In Jesus' name, Amen.