

Bearing One Another's Burdens

April 30, 2017

Acts 6:1-6; Galatians 6:2

Skit, "To Tell The Truth", done before sermon.

In a light-hearted way, this skit gives you a glimpse into Stephen Ministry, and the differences between Stephen Ministry and psychotherapy or theological education. The motivation for this ministry, as well as the training received in order to do it, grow out of love and the desire to care for each other. The underlying premise of Stephen Ministry is that we are able to care for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, as Christians, that is what we are called to do—to bear one another's burdens, and Stephen Ministry is one way in which we do so. There is a place for psychotherapy, and a place for theological examination and discussion, but their place is not in the mutual caring we offer each other.

The children's story is another aspect of the motivation behind caring ministries. This story is a beautiful image of the ways in which we are tied to each other by love. In many ways, it is a good image of Stephen Ministry. Here at Berkey, we've been involved in this program for 5 years. However, most of the work we do is invisible—it is behind the scenes, in confidential 1:1 care. The care that is given grows out of the bonds of love which hold us together as a community. If the strings that tied us together were visible, they would form a complex web of connection, crisscrossing the sanctuary.

There is no doubt that as a congregation, we are very good at providing care for each other. We have a unique meal ministry—the spots fill up so quickly that people who want to provide meals, can't! We have a vibrant prayer ministry—an intercessory prayer gathering each Monday evening, and many individuals who pray for the needs of the congregation and the world. We have active small groups, including Spirit Feast, where we care for each other. In these, and many other ways that are visible and invisible, we care for each other.

Where there's room to grow, though, is in our ability to ask for, and receive care from someone else. One of the unexpected challenges of implementing the Stephen Ministry program here has been how difficult it has been to find people who are willing to accept a Stephen Minister. The reasons are varied: when life is

feeling overwhelming, it is hard to imagine adding in one more thing, like a regular meeting with a Stephen Minister; people often feel like their need isn't as great as someone else's, so they decline Stephen Ministry so that someone else can benefit; we also like to think we can "do it on our own", that our challenges aren't great enough to need someone to walk with us. I think too, the thought of revealing our vulnerability with another person, maybe even someone we don't know that well, holds us back from accepting this kind of care. I also know that some of the people we have offered care to have had lots of other support systems and people in place, so the need for Stephen Ministry wasn't as great.

Regardless of the challenges of finding people to receive the care of a Stephen Minister, people have said yes to receiving care, both within and outside of our congregation. In total, we have cared for about 20 people, some for as short as a month, and others for several years. We have trained 8 Stephen Ministers; currently 4 are active. These Stephen Ministers have logged hundreds of hours of care over the last 5 years. In addition to these hours of 1:1 care, these Stephen Ministers have also gone through 50 hours of training, and, for the first few years of the program, 5 hours of supervision and continuing education per month. We have dropped the number of hours of supervision and continuing education to one 2.5 hour gathering each month, to make the time commitment more manageable for Stephen Ministers. These individuals are dedicated to offering significant parts of themselves and their time to caring for others; this is truly remarkable, and as a congregation, we are grateful!

The 2 short scriptures read this morning give us a biblical basis for ministry in the church, and provide the foundation for Stephen Ministry in particular. Paul calls us to bear each other's burdens, and Luke tells the story of how the early church, in the midst of rapid growth and persecution for their beliefs, and in response to a conflict that was developing within the community, attended to the internal needs of the community. Ministry in the Spirit is ministry that is attuned to how the Spirit is moving in the world, and also attuned to the needs within the Body of Christ. Preaching the Word was an important part of what the Twelve did after Pentecost, but attending to the needs of widows and orphans was also important. And there is the recognition that the same people can't do everything, so calling and empowering others with gifts for the various tasks was part of the organization of the church from the beginning. The needs within the Body determine the kind of leadership that is needed. Lots of hands are needed in

order to carry out the work of mission and ministry. Attending to the internal needs of the community is as important as witness and mission.

When Berkey decided to invest in this program, the desire was that a broader ministry of caring would happen. It wasn't that there was no care happening; on the contrary, lots of caring was happening in formal and informal ways. But the desire to be more intentional and to train and equip people for this particular caring ministry was present.

Stephen Ministry is one way in which we have attempted to equip people for this caring ministry, and also respond to needs within our community and beyond. But it isn't the only way, and it isn't enough on its own. We still need the kind of caring that happens informally and formally through personal interactions, small groups and pastoral care.

If Stephen Ministry is going to continue as a ministry within our congregation, we will need new leadership and people willing to say yes to providing, and receiving, this kind of care. Particularly, we need people to say yes to become Stephen Leaders, those trained to do the training and supervision of Stephen Ministers, make referrals—setting up the caring pairs, and do recruiting. Shirley Dick and I have been carrying all of these pieces, and when I leave, Shirley will not be able to do it all. Ideally, we should have 2-3 additional Stephen Leaders, if we want this ministry to thrive. We are working with the Caregiving Commission to help us during this time of transition, paying attention to whether this ministry needs a rest for a period of time, or whether there is still vision and energy to carry it forward.

Berkey's vision statement—to live Christ's loving, caring, healing presence in the world—is lived out in a particular way through Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministers embody Christ's compassion, care and healing as they walk beside those experiencing added challenges in their lives. It is not therapy or counselling, but caregiving. The biblical image of bearing one another's burdens is a good one for this ministry. The caring presence, while not taking away another's burden, shares the load of that burden for a short time.

Stephen Ministry is 1:1 caregiving. Stephen Ministers only meet with someone of their same gender, and they only meet with one person at a time. Providing care to more than one person takes different training and skills.

Another key aspect of Stephen Ministry is the supervision that I mentioned earlier. During these sessions, Stephen Ministers receive continuing education on various aspects related to caregiving, and they share about how they are doing as caregivers. Confidentiality is a very important part of Stephen Ministry, and names are never used in supervision. Only details that will help the group support the Stephen Minister in providing care are shared with the group. If you are receiving care from a Stephen Minister, the only people who will know about it are your Stephen Minister, the Stephen Leader and the pastors.

We are all members of one body; each of us has a valuable role to play in that body. Each of us is called according to our gifts and to use our gifts in bearing another's burdens. From the beginning of the church, people were identified to carry out various aspects of communal life; without apology, the leaders knew they could not do everything, and so called on the community to use their gifts for ministry and mission.

As a community we share our life together. We share in our sufferings and in our joys, bearing with one another. And this is all possible through the Spirit in whom we were baptized into one body. It is because of the Spirit working in us and through us, that we, the diverse body of Christ, can grow and thrive.

And that is the foundation of Stephen Ministry: we provide the care; God provides the cure. It is easy to think that healing depends on us and our ability to get it right. If I just say the right thing in the right way at the right time, the other person will feel better, their situation will improve and all will be well. A lot of time is spent in the 50 hours of training, learning the skills of caregiving: good listening, focusing on feelings--our own and the other person's; not working toward a particular result or solution. All of these skills, while important, can distract us and make us think the right skill or technique will make everything better. But that is not the case. While we want to provide the best care we can, we recognize that we are imperfect human beings, and we will make mistakes; and we recognize that we can't provide this care on our own. We need to rely on

the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, to work in us and through us to bring healing and hope to others.

And that takes the pressure off of us in all situations--not just in Stephen Ministry! It isn't about us, and it's not up to us! The ministry of healing belongs to God; we are but the ministers of the healing, the instruments of God's love, and the tools of God's care, bearing each other's burdens.

Thanks be to God, who heals and provides in ways beyond our knowing and our doing!