

“Preach The Gospel At All Times, And, If Necessary, Use Words”

- I. Today is the Feast of Pentecost, today is Mother’s Day, and today is Stephen Ministry Sunday. At the 10:30 service we will commission two new Ascension Stephen Ministry Leaders, Bob and Laura Barnes. This commissioning follows their recent completion of an intensive seven-day training course. And we will also commission Ascension’s first group of 22 Stephen Ministers. They have faithfully completed 50 hours of Stephen Ministry training since January.

The Stephen Ministry Program has been in operation since 1978. Individual parishes, such as the Church of the Ascension, enroll as Stephen Ministry congregations. We joined earlier this year. This is an ecumenical program, including churches from over 100 denominations throughout the world. The purpose of the Stephen Ministry Program is to recruit and prepare and equip lay Stephen Ministers to provide Christian care to others. The Stephen Ministry program is based upon the premise that we are ALL ministers in the church and ALL part of the Body of Christ.

Each trained Stephen Minister will work with one parishioner with whom they visit weekly. These parishioners may be experiencing a number of difficulties and life transitions. Stephen Ministers will receive both regular supervision and continuing education and have learned how to deal with many types of situations. In this program confidentiality is strictly maintained. We are very excited about the potential of this lay ministry program to deeply strengthen the way we care for each other at Church of the Ascension.

- II. Tangible example: I believe that the best way to help you understand the nature of Stephen Ministry is to give you an example. I was struck that many of the Stephen Leaders that I met when I attended Leadership training seven years ago had decided to take that step after having met regularly with a Stephen Minister in their own parish. One woman we met was helping start a Steven Ministry Program in two churches. She had recently completed training as a Stephen Minister, a step she took after having met regularly with a Stephen Minister who helped her deal with the accidental death of her adult son. It was a painful unexpected loss. Having benefited from this Ministry, she was strongly committed to become a Stephen Ministry Leader in order to help others to develop this program. While I served an Episcopal Church in Aiken, SC, I was privileged to participate in the development of that parish’s Stephen

Ministry Program and to see how Christian caregiving not only deeply enriches the lives of those receiving care, but also the lives of those who give it. Blessings that come out of doing God's work are always reciprocal.

There is power in Christian caregiving. Where does that power come from? We know that that power really doesn't come from you or me. We are channels or conduits for Christ's love. Look at the Church of the Ascension's Stephen Ministry banner behind me. The circle symbolizes God's creation and care for all of us. We are never beyond the reach of God's care. But if you look at the figure on the left side of the banner – that person is broken and fragmented. In contrast, the figure on the right side has moved beyond broken-ness to wholeness through the power of the cross – the redemptive power of Jesus Christ in our lives. Helping others move from brokenness to wholeness is the work of the Stephen Minister – to be a channel for God's grace in the lives of others as they move from broken-ness to wholeness.

III. Conclusion: "Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." This is a famous quote from St. Francis of Assisi. It is told that St. Francis traveled to Persia to share the gospel with the Sultan during the time of the Crusades. The Sultan, after hearing and observing Francis during his visit, replied, "Francis, if I might see other Christians such as you, I might myself be persuaded to become a Christian." Just think, my brothers and sisters, how many might come to faith through witnessing the love we have and the love we act upon with our Christian sisters and brothers here. How do we sustain such love in our busy and demanding lives? We do so by allowing God's Holy Spirit to fill us and then to love through us, the gift that is described in today's gospel:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' The Holy Spirit was given to us so that we might care for one another in the body of Christ. As Paul writes in I Corinthians 12:

No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, on this Day of Pentecost, the day when we celebrate the birthday of the church and the coming of God's Holy Spirit among us, let us commit ourselves anew to, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and, if necessary, use words."

Amen.