

Sermon: Comforting One Another
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:3-11
(Jonah 2:1-9, Matthew 9:2-8)

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2 Corinthians 1:3-11 –

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, ⁴ who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. ⁶ If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. ⁸ We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, ¹¹ as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

On this Sunday of commissioning new Stephen Ministers to serve our congregation and community I want to focus on the importance of this caring ministry in our midst. Since 1995 when members Ron and Nancy Carter first attended a Stephen Ministry Leadership Training course held in St. Louis dozens of our members have been trained to serve as Stephen Ministers. This ministry is named after the Stephen in Acts 6 who was one of seven people chosen to offer caring ministry to those in need when the apostles found it impossible to meet all the needs of the growing Christian fellowship themselves. While the apostles devoted themselves to the ministry of preaching and teaching, Stephen and the others were sent to offer comfort and support to meet the needs of others in the young

body of believers. Since 1975, the Stephen Ministries, based in St. Louis, has offered training to equip church members to offer distinctively Christian care in congregations as a support to the preaching and teaching ministries of pastors in those congregations. We are proud to be a part of a caring ministry network which includes thousands of congregations in all 50 states and many foreign countries where hundreds of thousands of trained Stephen Ministers offer distinctively Christian care to those in need.

The scripture passage from 2 Corinthians is one of the passages we consider a “theme passage” for the work of Stephen Ministry. After reading this heartfelt, honest testimony from the Apostle Paul I am almost shocked at the emotions which Paul expresses in these powerful verses. Here we have this lion of an apostle who contended for the gospel in such powerful ways stating “We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia: for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired even of life itself.” (vs. 8) Wow! Paul was so burdened that he came to the point of giving up hope for his life to continue. In fact, in the first 5 verses of our passage today, Paul refers 17 times – 17 times – to affliction, suffering, and the consolation which is the direct result of experiencing the first two things. Here we have a giant of the faith acknowledging that to be a follower and servant of Jesus Christ is not a walk in the park! In fact, we can assume from this passage that anyone who wants to be a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ is in for a truly challenging journey in life! There is no automatic protection from the realities of what life brings our way every day!

Stephen Ministry recognizes this reality and exists to offer the comfort and support of caring Christian friends to walk alongside anyone who is following in Paul’s footsteps. I want to refer to the beautiful Stephen Ministry banner found on the roadside wall of our sanctuary to help us understand more about the specific nature of Stephen Ministry. This banner hangs here each Sunday as we worship and we probably don’t even see it or think

about it anymore. But the symbols in the banner teach us about the theology and practice of Stephen Ministry very clearly.

The first thing to notice on the banner is the person on the left as we look at it. As you can see, they have a visible fracture right down the center of their person. This represents the fact that, contrary to appearances, we are all people who experience brokenness in some aspect of our being or life experience – no exceptions! The human experience is one in which we all are in process of becoming the people God intends us to be. On that journey we deal every day with aspects of our personal character and life experience which are less than what God intends, things where we feel that sense of brokenness. Our scripture passages today help us understand some of the reasons for that brokenness.

From Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians we understand that the struggle to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ means that, as Paul puts it, "the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us." (vs. 5) What does Paul mean by this? I believe he means that because of our connection with Jesus Christ by faith, we also struggle as Christ did to confront sin and human imperfection and to labor with all our strength to become more like Christ. That is a challenging task. All of us know well the battles we fight with our own humanity, our own sinful nature at war with the presence of Christ in us and with us. We struggle to be the people Jesus wants us to be. Christ wrestled and struggled with the presence of evil in his beloved children and the world created by and for him. He ultimately suffered and died on the cross in carrying out that struggle against sin. As we battle sin and all that is displeasing to God in our lives and world, we are joined to Christ in his experience of suffering for these things. Sometimes a Stephen ministry caring relationship is a tremendous support for someone as they struggle to become the person they know God wants them to be fighting against their own heartaches and hurts as Jesus' follower.

But our struggles and suffering aren't only the result of the battle between our sinful nature and the presence of Christ in us shaping us to be more like him. Our passage from Jonah illustrates the reality that sometimes our difficult life experiences are self-inflicted wounds. Jonah had been called by God to carry God's message to the people of Nineveh, the capital city of Babylon. Knowing these people were heathen sinners whom any self-respecting Jewish person would shun, Jonah heads in the opposite direction refusing to do what God had called him to do. As a result of his disobedience to God's call, Jonah experiences the storm at sea which endangers the entire crew of the ship he is fleeing on (how often our disobedience impacts the lives of others around us!). Jonah is ultimately dumped overboard and picked up by God's underwater mode of transportation for recalcitrant preachers! Jonah's words of prayer in this situation are powerful and evocative as well – he speaks of the waters closing in on him and of weeds being wrapped around his head. Ever been in a predicament like that before yourself? Most of us have – we try to follow our own plan rather than God's and before long we are overwhelmed and paralyzed. The good news of this experience is the fact that God hears the plea of his disobedient messenger even in the depths of his despair and delivers him from his dire predicament. Jonah didn't have a Stephen Minister in the midst of his time of suffering, but it's good to know that Stephen Ministers can walk along with us even when our struggles are the result of the self-inflicted wounds of our own stubbornness and unwillingness to follow the path which God points us toward.

Our Matthew passage demonstrates for us another reason for the brokenness we encounter in daily living. The passage is the familiar story of friends carrying a paralytic person to meet Jesus and hopefully be healed by the encounter with Christ. Certainly some degree of our sufferings in this world is the result of living in a world that has, like the person in our banner, been fractured by sin. As we encounter illness and disease, as we wrestle with injustice and oppression, as we watch events unfolding in the Middle

East in these chaotic days there, we realize once again we live in a sinful and imperfect world where, like Jonah's companions on the boat, we are caught up in the storms of life which are beyond our control. We suffer and struggle with the heartache and disappointment of a world which offers less than God's best. We are worn down by the burden of it all and thrown down by the sudden news of accidents, job losses, a diagnosis of cancer or a sudden heart attack, the shocking news of divorce or abuse or any of a myriad of other events in our lives. But how good it is to know that there are people who are willing to carry us into the presence of Jesus when we can't make it ourselves! Stephen ministers are like those friends who, once again, come alongside a broken person and help them come to the place where they can encounter Jesus as the curegiver par excellence! That's what the word "consolation" repeated in the Corinthians passage really means – parakelsis, one who comes alongside another, comforts another.

So in our own brokenness – whether from the struggle to become more like Christ, to overcome our own stubbornness and humanness, or just to deal with the fractured world in which we live – in those places we need others who will help point us to Jesus Christ. Notice in the banner that the central image is the Cross. This represents the truth that we are met in our brokenness by Jesus Christ who comes alongside us in our places of hurt and despair however dark and lonely they may be. Stephen ministers are like those friends of the paralytic who just want to help their friend get to the person who can make them whole. Stephen ministry has as one of its mottos the phrase "We are the *caregivers* but God is the *curegiver*." Stephen ministers are not the ones who bring people from places of brokenness to a place of healing and wholeness. Notice in the banner once again that the whole person depicted there has come *through* the cross to the other side from where they were. They have encountered Jesus Christ – Christ carries them from brokenness to wholeness! As Jonah testified at the end of his prayer, "Deliverance belongs to God." (Jonah 2:9) Paul testifies in the midst of his despair for life that he

learned to rely not on himself or anyone else but on God who raises the dead. God has rescued Paul and will continue to rescue him as he journeys the path from brokenness to wholeness keeping his mind and heart focused on Jesus Christ.

The final image of the banner is the circle surrounding the persons depicted there and the cross at the center. This circle is representative of the circle of God's love for us in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. This entire journey from recognizing our own needs to encountering Jesus Christ and moving toward greater wholeness happens within the circle of God's never-ending love for us in his Son Jesus Christ. That love surrounds us, sustains us, and refuses to let us go. This love is the catalyst for Stephen ministers to answer the call to serve – so they can share God's love with those in need. This love is the heart of how God works in our lives – loving us just the way we are, fractured and sinful and hurting – but loving us too much to leave us that way. Within the circle of God's love and through the consolation of a faithful Stephen Minister we can journey the road toward healing and becoming more and more the person God desires us to be!

I hope this helps visualize and make practical for all of us what Stephen Ministry is all about. It is a wonderful privilege to have this ministry present in our congregation and to welcome Carol, Sharon, Hal, and Nancy to the circle of Stephen Ministry at OLCC,P. We are excited to have them join us in this ministry of distinctively Christian caregiving. As wonderful as this all is, there is one problem I have to acknowledge in relationship to Stephen Ministry – it's us! Yes, you and me. The problem has probably been illustrated right here among us this morning. Have you had someone say to you "How are you?" as you arrived or moved around the building this morning? Probably so. And my guess is most of us answered "Oh, I'm fine!" That's the problem – you see, at least some of us are not fine this morning! Some of us are struggling to live out our faith journey or even

believe it's still valid or true for us. Some of us are struggling with our own self-inflicted wounds of pride or selfishness and the resulting consequences in our lives and relationships. And I know some of us are just dealing with the burdens of being worn down and thrown down by the realities of daily living in a broken world.

In Jonah's prayer there is a very telling phrase toward the end: Jonah prays "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs." (Jonah 2:8) Perhaps the hardest idol for us as Christians to deal with is our pride, our own sense of self-sufficiency and independence. We put on a good front and tell others we are fine when we really are not. We try to limp along on our own when we could really use the consolation of a friend who would walk alongside us, listen to our story, pray for us and just be there with us. But if we cling to the idol of our pride and self-sufficiency we forfeit the grace that could be ours through Jesus Christ and his ministry to us. For Stephen Ministry to be fruitful in our lives and congregation we have to be willing to be who we are – we are all broken people in one way or another. When we are honest about that and open to comforting one another, we will experience the grace of God in wonderful ways. Please talk with me or one of the other Stephen Ministers you saw here in worship today if you need someone like the friends of the paralyzed man in our scripture passage today. We need each other to help carry one another into the presence of Jesus Christ so that, within the circle of God's love, we can move from brokenness to wholeness to the glory of God! And please keep these new Stephen Ministers, our entire Stephen Ministry here and Stephen Ministries as an organization in your prayers. Amen.