

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, TX

Dear Friends in Christ,

I come to you today to tell you two stories about my involvement with Stephen Ministries: first, as a Care Receiver, and secondly, as a Stephen Minister.

About nineteen years ago, I moved to Texas. This was my third move in four years, after having lived in Dayton, OH; Binghamton, NY; and Rochester, MN. After scouting out a few Lutheran churches in the area looking for a vibrant youth program, my daughter Shannon and I felt drawn to Peace Lutheran Church. Right away I joined the choir as I had done when I had lived other places. Since I loved singing so much, I was hoping that being with the choir would help me feel at home. And yes, it helped, but I still felt lost and alone.

I don't know if any of you have ever done this, but I would come to church wearing my "smiley face", make cordial contact and back away before anyone noticed that I was just "going through the motions." I had been so busy unpacking and trying to take care of Shannon, our pets, household chores, and looking for work, that I hadn't taken the time to look for the "real me" that had been packed away since I left Dayton, OH.

Now I don't remember if I heard about Stephen Ministry in a bulletin or if a Stephen Minister made an announcement, but after a few weeks of still feeling not quite right, I decided to make the call to a Stephen

Leader. Within two weeks I had a meeting with a Stephen Minister who was selected for me.

This may sound a little silly, I want you to picture a full grown golden retriever. Picture the wagging tail and “happy to see you” look on it’s face. I don’t mean to say that my Stephen Minister was a dog. It was just that I could immediately sense her warmth and kindness no matter what I had to say. She made me feel safe, safe enough to open up to her. In Stephen Ministry, we learn about offering a kind of “safe house.” The foundation is grace-based acceptance, the walls are constructed with empathy and active listening, and the roof is sealed by confidentiality.

Over the course of a few months, my Stephen Minister helped me see I had been dealing with loss. And she encouraged me to express my feelings of shock, anger, and sadness without judgement. You see, I had left my best friends and colleagues in Dayton and then I left my 85 year old father and two sisters in Minnesota. My marriage was on shaky ground and I didn’t have a support system here. My whole life had changed and I didn’t feel ready to start all over again.

Yes, I could have called my friends in Ohio, but they would just say, “Poop or get off the potty.” My Dad would have said, “Don’t worry, everything will look better in the morning.” My husband probably would have said, “Blah, blah, blah, what’s your point? And, can’t you see I’m busy.”

I was already telling myself to “snap out of it.” But my Stephen Minister just let me talk while she listened. I didn’t need a lecture and didn’t want advice. She accepted me where I was and encouraged me. She was there to walk beside me in my journey. As the weeks went by, I gained

self-confidence and regained my sense of humor. I started believing that I was a beloved child of God and I knew I would never really be alone again.

You may be wondering what my story has to do with today's Gospel lesson. Listen again to the first verse:

Now when Jesus heard (about the beheading of John the Baptist), he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

Borrowing from our devotional, Christ in Our Home, Laura Jane Gifford writes, "Jesus has withdrawn to mourn a deep personal tragedy....Jesus wants space to mourn. And, like us, Jesus continues to feel a web of commitments tugging at his time. When we're mourning a loss in the midst of life's obligations, we can remember that in this, too, we are not alone.

Fast forward to eight years ago when I was asked if I'd consider training to be a Stephen Minister. This was after my breast cancer treatments and after my divorce. I had been asked two other times in the past but I always had an excuse why I declined. This time felt like a calling, to refine the listening skills I had used with teenagers in my previous jobs and to offer the care and compassion shown to me when I needed help.

I was commissioned as a Stephen Minister in April of 2010 and have been privileged to offer support to four Care Receivers since then. The Stephen Ministry training and regular supervision has been invaluable. This opportunity has deepened my faith and taught me about the remarkable resilience God provides us when facing life's challenges. I know that Jesus wants us to withdraw from the chaos around us to

seek healing for our souls through prayer, scripture, and sometimes from a compassionate listener, a Stephen Minister.

Please be clear that a Stephen Minister can't fix anyone's problems. He or she will not mow your lawn, find you a job, or heal your broken heart. But Stephen Ministers can be there to hear your pain and help you feel the compassion and care of Christ in your journey.

I invite you to consider if Stephen Ministry is right for you—either as a Care Receiver or a Caregiver. Or, maybe you know someone who could benefit from this Ministry—even if they aren't a member here. For further information, please talk to Laura Eichner or Ernie Klatt. And please read the insert by Debbie Alexander and Matt Bloom.

We know that Jesus Christ is the “Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow. Give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow. Thanks be to God. Amen