

***STRENGTH TO LOVE***  
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University Congregational Church  
April 5, 2009

**Reading: Psalm 31: 9-19 (NRSV)**

**Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.**

**I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many – terror all around! – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.**

**But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love. Do not let me be put to shame, O Lord, for I call on you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt.**

**Oh how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone!**

Though I will not ask for a show of hands I wonder if you have had moments in your life when you felt like the psalmist. There have certainly been moments when I felt totally spent in every dimension of my being. There have been times when people have treated me maliciously with the clear intent of hurting me. I have known days when I felt abandoned and without a friend in the world.

If you have been through a long illness or a divorce you know something of this problem as well. Initially people will offer a lot of concern. They might visit you or send you a note. But there is a limit to how much time and emotional energy many people are willing to commit to illness, especially if the prognosis is fatal. People are also constrained by the time they are willing to give to those who need to ventilate about their ex-spouse – their pain, anger, resentment, disillusionment, and all of the charges and counter charges of lying, cheating, and manipulating. This is especially difficult to those friends that the two of you shared. They will say that they do not want to take sides and so they will side with no one. Social arrangements become difficult with a third wheel or unattached party.

Recently widowed people feel some of these same issues. Women and men who are confined to nursing homes know exactly what I am talking about. Their bodies have betrayed them. The communities in which they raised their children and made their careers are dwindling. Their own children have often moved to disparate parts of the country. And they are busy raising their children and building their careers. Meaning is more difficult to discern, as one's independence is lost with vision or agility or hearing. An elderly gentleman at the Life Care Center

said to me a few weeks ago, “I feel abandoned.” How did the psalmist phrase it? “My eyes waste away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.” I think we can all identify with a poem by Jeanne Marie Beaumont, ironically entitled “Afraid So:”

“Is it starting to rain?  
Did the check bounce?  
Are we out of coffee?  
Is this going to hurt?  
Could you lose your job?  
Did the glass break?  
Was the baggage misrouted?  
Will this go on my record?  
Are you missing much money?  
Was anyone injured?  
Is the traffic heavy?  
Do I have to remove my clothes?  
Will it leave a scar?  
Must you go?  
Will this be in the papers?  
Is my time up already?  
Are we seeing the understudy?  
Will it affect my eyesight?  
Did all the books burn?  
Are you still smoking?  
Is the bone broken?  
Will I have to put him to sleep?  
Was the car totaled?  
Am I responsible for these charges?  
Are you contagious?  
Will we have to wait long?  
Is the runway icy?  
Was the gun loaded?”

Could this cause side effects?  
Do you know who betrayed you?  
Is the wound infected?  
Are we lost?  
Will it get any worse?”<sup>1</sup>

Lost love, pain, betrayal, disease, old age, and death are common realities of human life. We are too often isolated in our efforts of recovery and wholeness.

But it is also true that we often put ourselves beyond the hands of grace. We distance ourselves from the people who can break the spell cast by loneliness, death, and fear. Perhaps we are embarrassed by the divorce, or the hysterectomy, or the job layoff. We do not like the feeling of being vulnerable or dependent on others. We would like to think that we could manage our own problems. I have had the experience of people calling for a pastoral counseling appointment. They arrive at my office and spend an hour or so telling me of an experience or a relationship that cuts to the marrow of their being. Sometimes what they share is confessional in nature. They leave my office and I never see or hear from them again. They do not answer messages or respond to notes. Maybe that was all they needed. But in most cases I know that would not be the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Marie Beaumont, “Afraid So,” *Good Poems for Hard Times*, selected by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking Press, 2005), pp. 169 – 170.

case. Pride or shame erects walls between our selves and the people who can be restorative to our souls.

Certainly Jesus understood the depth and power of abandonment as he entered the city of Jerusalem. His disciples would not only desert him, but would forsake him, denying they even knew him. Rome could care less about one more Jewish peasant. The Sanhedrin knew little about him but was sufficiently intimidated by the itinerant preacher they were instrumental in his trial and execution. People who knew nothing about him would shout “Hosanna” on Sunday and “Crucify him,” by Friday of the same week. And on the cross Jesus sensed the ultimate defection as he cried from the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Our culture and society are filled with myths and news stories of abandonment. From the myth of Romulus and Remus to the fairy tale of Snow White we wrestle with one of the great anxieties of human beings. Legislation has been created in the last few decades that allow mothers to leave a newborn infant at a hospital, fire station or other designated place without threat of criminal charges. This was initially legislated to stem to tide of teenaged mothers who would leave their newborns in dumpsters or in drainage culverts where they would die. More recently states with such

legislation are struggling with families who are leaving older children, even in their teens, with social service agencies.

A man once told me story about himself and his daughter. They had been traveling by automobile over a great distance. Like most kids she was bored and tired. And like most kids she began to complain to the point of tears. As I recall the story she said something inappropriate. Elmer pulled the car over to the side of the road and told her to get out of the car. She could not believe her ears and asked, "What did you say?"

The father yelled, "I said get out of the car."

The child opened the door and stepped out of the car. As soon as she closed the door Elmer gunned the engine and sped off down the highway. He heard the girl scream and watched from the rear-view mirror as she began to run after the car. Elmer drove far enough away that his daughter could no longer see the car. He thought he had taught her a lesson in patience, respect, and self-control.

After about five minutes he turned the car around and drove back to the spot where he had left the child. She was sitting on the berm of the highway, weeping inconsolably. Elmer's "lesson" left a deep scar on his child's soul and he never overcame the guilt for the cruelty he had perpetrated on her. It haunted him for the rest of his life.

We can choose to be alone. We are all lonely sometimes. But no one need feel abandoned.

In the fall of 2007 I introduced to our Church Council an internationally recognized program of Christian care giving called Stephen Ministry. The Council agreed to endorse the program and recruited Karen Robu, Phil Rhea, and Arland Wallace to spend a week with me in St. Louis for the Stephen Ministry Leaders training. Upon our return Phil, Karen, and Arland began the process of recruiting and training other lay members to be Stephen Ministers. These recruits spent fifty hours in training learning the skills of listening, nurturing, and supporting people who are struggling with a transition issue in their lives. Examples include divorce, unemployment, chronic and even terminal illnesses. Today we are privileged to commission our Stephen Ministers for this invaluable work.

We have written to you about this program on several occasions. You can learn more about Stephen Ministries on their website or speak with one of our Stephen Ministers. I am not going to repeat that information here. I would like to lift up two vital aspects of the work of Stephen Ministry that I think are at the heart of this work.

You can imagine that someone who is in training might wonder, “What should I say?” to the person who has just been given a terminal diagnosis; or to the expecting mother who has learned that the fetus she is now carrying is stillborn; or to the person who is laid off from work with a company for which he or she has been employed for 25 or 30 years. Gone are the income, the health insurance, and the pension plan. What are the right words – even the right answers – to such painful dilemmas that people face?

Are there religious answers to these problems or solutions to ease the pain and fear? Dare we talk about God’s plan, or will, or offer a smug “God will provide” resolution? A Stephen Minister dare not enter anyone’s life with the assumption that they will solve the problem or tender a magical revelation. Our Stephen Ministers have been trained to avoid such assumptions and anyone who requests a caregiver cannot make such assumptions either.

What can a Stephen Minister offer with real authority? As caregivers, Stephen Ministers can offer a listening heart. Henri Nouwen uses this idea in his book *Spiritual Direction*. There he describes the discipline of learning how to see God in our hearts. We wrote:

“With practice, we allow God to enter into our heartbeat and our breathing, into our thoughts

and emotions, into our hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting, and into every membrane of our body. It is by being awake to God in us that we can increasingly see God in the world around us.

The discipline of the Heart makes us aware that praying is not only listening to but listening with the heart. Prayers helps us stand in the presence of God with all we have and are; our fears and anxieties, our guilt and shame; our sexual fantasies; our greed and anger; our joys, successes, aspirations, and hopes; our reflections, dreams and mental wandering; and most of all our family, friends, and enemies – in short, all that makes us who we are.”<sup>2</sup>

It is with the listening heart that a Stephen Minister enters our lives and meets us where we are. Without being judgmental a Stephen Minister can listen to your heart and hold all that you treasure with deep respect. A listening heart is the most important skill of a Stephen Minister.

The relationship of listening hearts is nothing less than the company of God. I mean that most sincerely. The gospel of Jesus teaches us that whenever two or more people are gathered together in love, there is God. God is the company of listening and caring hearts. Robert Benson renders the words of Jesus thusly:

“You say to me, ‘Are you the One?’  
And I say to you that I am the hope of the hopeless,  
the helper of those who have no helper,  
the treasure of those in need, the physician of the sick,

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction* (New York: Harper One, 2006), xvi-xvii.

and the resurrection of the dead.  
And I shall give you what no eye has ever seen,  
what no ear has ever heard,  
and what no hand has ever touched,  
what has never before arisen in a human heart.”<sup>3</sup>

Yes, right there in the midst of searching, praying, weeping, listening, laughing, understanding, and questioning there is God. The listening heart presumes the presence of another human soul. Listening hearts create the community of faith we call University Congregational Church.

Today we commission these Stephen Ministers and draw a line in the sand of abandonment. As our program grows and with it the depth our ministry people will honestly declare: “You are my God. My times are in your hand; Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.”

I now ask these Stephen Ministers to come forward as we commission them to the healing ministry we have created in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. Let us recognize you, pray with you, and send you forth into that future where hope meets despair and love conquers death.

*Finis*

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Benson, *Venite: A Book of Daily Prayer* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 191.