

THE DAILY DISTRIBUTION
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University Congregational Church

Reading: Acts 6: 1-7 (NRSV)

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word. What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

At the very beginning of its history, the young Christian community in Jerusalem found itself in conflict. I would like to set that conflict in context before I attempt to suggest the meaning of the story for us as we prepare to commission Karen Robu, Phil Rhea, and Arland Wallace as our Stephen Ministry Leaders.

Let us remember that these first Christians thought of themselves as Jews. They maintained not only their Jewish identity but also their temple and synagogue affiliations. It was a custom in the local synagogue to provide for the needy. Every Friday morning collectors went into the market place and to private homes seeking donations of both money and food. The basket that the gifts were placed in was called a *kuppah*. That

afternoon these gifts were distributed to the widows, orphans, and needy. These recipients fell into two primary groups. First were those whose need was temporary. They were given enough to tide them over through their crises. The second group was that of persons whose need was permanent or long term. They would be given enough food for two meals a day for the next seven days. I would also point out that a daily collection could also be taken for those who were in immediate crisis.

Part of the problem that we encounter in the book of Acts has to do with a division in the Jewish community. Quite simplistically, there were two kinds of Jews. In one group we find the Palestinian Jews, those whose home was also Jerusalem. These Jews spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The other Jews were foreign to Palestine, having come from other countries. Many of them only spoke Greek, the dominant language of trade in the region and in that era. The Palestinian Jews took great pride in their history and geography and saw themselves as favored or superior. Thus we read that the Hellenists were complaining against the Hebrews. We cannot be certain what the exact complaint was; whether the Hellenic Jews were being completely neglected or somehow being slighted in the daily distribution.

We might also note that the Apostles felt that their time and energy must be focused on the Word, that is to say in prayer, teaching, and preaching. They firmly believed that their first calling was the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus. We read that they did not believe that they should “serve tables.” The twin phrases found in this reading of Acts, “daily distribution” and “serve tables” are both represented in the Greek word, *diakonia*. This budding community of faith seems not to have questioned this emphasis on their primary ministry, and embraced

the idea that other leaders should be set aside for the *diakonia*. It is where we get the term “deacon.” Deacons are those who serve. The leading deacon in this story was Stephen, where the name for our expanding ministry is rooted.

There are plenty of examples in the gospels where Jesus models the servant at the table. This is true at the Last Supper when he chastised the disciples for missing the point of both his ministry and impending death. They wanted to play the blame game. But Jesus said:

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22: 25-27 NRSV)

Jesus had no doubt that among men in this world the greater value was to be served. Servants did not command prestige or social status. Rather than argue about what the world valued Jesus directed his disciples’ attention to the actuality of his own life. He, the leader of his disciples, the “Son of Man,” is a servant. We have heard from his own lips that he came into the world to serve and he expressly meets the needs of those who gather at his table. I submit to you that what is true for Christ is true for his followers. The summons to service becomes binding on all who declare him to be the “way” or the revelation of the Kingdom of God.

In other words, we are followers after Jesus i.e., disciples, when we serve. This is how we “love one another.” And we must hasten to say that this way of the Kingdom is found in specific acts of service.

Diakonia means food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, welcome for

the stranger, visitation for the sick and imprisoned. (Matthew 25:31-46) In the words of Harvey Cox, *diakonia* is “that act of healing and reconciling, binding up wounds and bridging chasms, restoring health to the organism.”¹ As Christ lives for us, so we live for others.²

So it was that throughout the history of the Christian church that *diakonia* was a vital power in the ministry of the church in a dynamic relationship with the ministry of the Word and Christian fellowship. Congregations and denominations founded schools and colleges, hospitals and clinics, orphanages and a variety of social services. I think of John Wesley who, in the 18th century opened a credit union for the poor as well as a pharmacy. These faith-based ministries were the primary sources of care for the needy. But in the twentieth century these agencies and institutions began to give way to government sponsorship and their relationships to denominations have faded away for the most part. And I sometimes think that this has been detrimental to both church and society. I believe that the church’s mission and purpose for being is weakened when *diakonia* has become a footnote in the life of a congregation and denomination. The power of Christian discipleship sputters and fizzles when the church is only about worship and fellowship – good music and food.

But even if we had universal health care insurance and an efficient health care delivery system that met the full spectrum of medical and psychiatric needs we would find such a system wanting. Healing, you see, is more than anatomy, more than physiology, more than biology, and

¹ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: MacMillan, 1966), p. 131.

² James Gary Blaine, *Diakonia: The Servant Ministry of the Church in Theory and Practice* (Atlanta: Emory University, 1982), p. 31.

more than psychopharmacology. Healing is a profoundly communal event. Healing is as dependent on human relationships as it is on medical science. I would argue that there is no social need that is not also dependent on caring relationships between human beings, including poverty, illiteracy, housing, and criminal justice. And when every institutional and scientific means of healing arrives at its inevitable end it is human compassion that will see us through suffering and death. It will be faithful friends and family that will help us appropriate the devastation of trauma, loneliness, despair, and disease.

It is like the story of the cab driver who was called out to a late night pickup in August. The home was a small brick fourplex in a quiet part of town. He assumed that his passenger might be one who had partied too late, or someone who had a fight with a lover, or a worker heading to an early shift in the industrial part of town.

He arrived at the home about 2:30 A.M.. The building was dark except for a single light from a ground floor window. Many cab drivers would simply honk their horn in such circumstances. But this cabbie knew that many folks relied on cabs as their only source of transportation. He reasoned that his customer might be someone who needed assistance. He went to the door and knocked. "Just a minute," answered a frail, elderly voice. He could hear her dragging something across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80's stood before him. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like someone out of the 1940's. By her side was a small nylon suitcase.

The apartment looked as if no one lived in it. All of the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the mantel, no

knickknacks or photos on the wall. The kitchen counter was bare except for a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware.

“Would you please carry my bag to the car?” she asked. He took the suitcase to the cab and then returned to assist the woman. She took his arm and they walked slowly toward the curb. She thanked him for his kindness. “It’s nothing,” he told her. “I try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.”

In the cab the woman gave the driver the address of her destination. She then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?”

“It is not the shortest way,” the cabbie protested.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she replied. “I am in no hurry at all. I am on my way to a hospice facility.”

The cabbie looked through the rear view mirror. He could see that her eyes were glistening. She continued, “I don’t have any family left. The doctors say that I do not have very long. I would just like to drive through my home town one more time.”

The cabbie reached over and turned off the meter. “What route would you like to take?” he asked.

For two hours they drove through the city. She showed him the building where she had her first job as an elevator operator. They stopped in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom she had gone dancing as a young woman. They drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. Sometimes she would ask the cab driver to slow down in front of a particular building or corner and would just sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing. As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon she finally said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.”

They drove in silence to the hospice facility. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as they pulled up to the door. They seemed to have been expecting her. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move.

The driver opened the trunk of the cab and took out her small suitcase. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. “How much do you owe you?” she asked.

“You don’t owe me a thing,” he replied.

“You have to make a living,” she insisted.

“There are other passengers,” he responded. And almost without thinking he bent down and gave her a hug. She held him tightly.

“You gave an old woman a few moments of joy,” she whispered in his ear. “Thank you very much.” They both squeezed each other just a little bit harder.

As they wheeled her into hospice care the cab driver walked through the dim morning light back to his cab. Behind him he heard the doors shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life. Driving away he thought that he had never done anything so important in all of his life.³

With the inauguration of Stephen Ministry, University Congregational Church is about to embark on a long ride through the night of loneliness, divorce, sickness, unemployment, chronic illness, aging, the many faces of change that sometimes traumatize us, and even dying. We will listen to stories of birth, childhood, courtships, marriages, children, and grandchildren. We will visit the monuments of personal

³ The author and source of this story is unknown.
<http://www.inspirationalstories.com>, 1998-2008. Downloaded 7/26/2008.

history, the places where identity is shaped and changed. We will sometimes sit in silence to reminisce and find meaning.

The Stephen Ministry series is an extension of my ministry in pastoral care. I will continue to be the primary pastoral care giver. I will not diminish my responsibilities to those who are in crises, hospital, hospice care, or any other personal and family emergency. I will continue my pastoral care responsibilities for those who are planning weddings, baptisms, and memorial services.

A Stephen Minister will work with people on an ongoing basis through the long months of recovery, rehabilitation, and readjustment. Stephen Ministry offers one to one quality care for the members and friends of this church. It is staffed by lay men and women who will receive intensive training on the arts of listening, confidentiality, bereavement, and spiritual resources. Stephen Ministers will commit not only to a regular caring relationship with their care receiver, but also to continuing education, supervision, and support.

Today we are commissioning Stephen Ministry Leaders. Karen, Phil, Arland, and I have received seven full days of intensive training in St. Louis. That training gives our Stephen Ministry Leaders the tools that we will need to recruit, train, supervise, encourage, and support our Stephen Ministers. Training for Stephen Ministers will begin this September and will conclude in the winter of 2009. We are planning to make Stephen Ministers available next spring.

Today we affirm our covenant to meet the needs of our congregation with new depths of awareness and skill. We offer to all in need the daily distribution of love and understanding. We offer them the bread of friendship and hope.

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