

## **Getting Things Done**

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Exodus 18; Ephesians 4; Matthew 5

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,  
grace be to you and peace from the God who is,  
who was and who is still yet to come. Amen

This morning, it is our pleasure to celebrate  
"Stephen Ministry Sunday" – an annual opportunity  
to highlight the very important ministry  
our Stephen Leaders and Stephen Ministers perform  
as they extend Christ's compassion to you  
during times of stress and transition.

We at Hope are a little bit like the Israelites in the desert  
in this morning's reading from Exodus.

When we launched Stephen Ministry 18 months ago  
we challenged, gently, the way in which care is delivered  
to our members and to our community.

Previously, when care has been needed,  
the congregation – and the community around us –  
has usually looked to one of the pastors  
to provide the needed guidance, support and care  
for those who were hurting.

We're blessed by the pastoral care  
our part time visitation pastors,  
Pastor Nelson and Pastor Halverson, continue to give.  
And we've been blessed by the pastoral care the permanent  
pastors of the congregation have given over the years.

But as Pastors, we've felt frustrated  
because caring for the number and needs of hurting people  
usually requires far more time than we have available.  
There's always a new crisis that demands our attention.  
Another death; another serious illness;  
another family under stress;

another single person wrestling with their faith.  
As a result, people who need care and support  
often receive far less than they need.

That's why we launched Stephen Ministry in 2006.  
Stephen Ministers are lay-people who have gone through  
50 hours of intensive training.  
They are prepared spiritually, emotionally and practically  
to walk with persons going through challenging times.  
Through their compassionate empathy,  
they offer a non-judgmental presence  
and help to extend hope in tangible ways.  
By training gifted individuals to help with the caring,  
Stephen Ministry multiplies the amount of caring  
that can be accomplished and helps individual care receivers  
experience the support and concern they need  
for as long as they need it.  
One person can't do it alone –  
as we learned in our reading from Exodus.

In our reading from Exodus 18,  
we come upon the Israelites  
after they have escaped from Egypt  
and after their first few weeks of wandering in the wilderness.  
Moses' father in law, Jethro, visits the Israelites  
and brings Moses his wife and children.  
No sooner is the family reunited, though,  
than Jethro comes upon this mob scene.  
He sees Moses with the people lined up before him  
like the post office two weeks before Christmas.  
As far as Jethro can see,  
everyone is waiting to meet with Moses.  
Moses is virtually their only leader,  
attempting to arbitrate all the disputes  
among his fellow Israelites.

As a result, he ends up with a calendar as full as a judge's the day after a riot.

Jethro says to Moses,  
"What is this you are doing for the people?  
Why do you alone sit as judge,  
while all these people stand around you  
from morning until evening?"

Does Jethro merely study Moses' inefficient management style and come to this conclusion on his own?  
Everyone else sees what's going on here,  
with Israelites milling around and grouching  
about how slow the process is.  
Yet is Jethro simply the wisest fellow around,  
who figures out what no one else can fathom?  
The psychologist Paul Tournier, in his book *Guilt and Grace*,  
believes that someone tells Jethro to mention to Moses  
his ineffectiveness as an administrator.  
And Tournier suggests that it was Moses' wife, Zipporah!

Tournier could be right.  
While the OT is a very patriarchal book,  
in the background the women play an important role;  
they are often the ones who get things done.  
Maybe Zipporah does urge her father to counsel her husband.  
She daily endures Moses' shortcomings  
and finally puts the word in her father's ear.

Whether it happened just this way,  
this event takes place after God has freed the Israelites.  
But this experience of redemption hasn't endowed Moses  
with vast amounts of skill or creativity in leading his people.  
He hasn't mastered the art of delegating.  
If Moses doesn't learn soon

to use the gifts of all of God's people,  
Jethro says he will wither and die on the vine.  
He needs some on the job training.<sup>i</sup>

So Jethro suggests appointing assistants,  
some wise, sincere people who are known for their integrity.  
Once in place, they prove that  
they not only do some things well,  
they do some things – especially the daily work –  
even better than Moses did.

Moses seems cut out for the big events:  
living face to face with God, meeting large crises,  
casting a vision, establishing community standards.  
When he takes the test of daily details, however,  
he gets poor grades.

So Jethro's solution is to promote Moses  
to appeals court judge who deals only  
with the most difficult problems.

Jethro shows how best to get things done.  
He brings peace and order to the Israelites  
by introducing the elementary process of the division of labor.  
He might also, by the way, have saved Moses' marriage!

This passage reveals much about Pastors.  
It's easy for us to get distracted, to "major in the minors."  
What's absolutely necessary for us  
is to spend time alone with God  
so that God's love directs us  
rather than the affections, or the demands, or the complaints  
of a congregation's parishioners.

Moses had his time of being away from the people with God.  
Jesus took his opportunities to be alone to pray,  
sometimes all night.

We pastors must know our jobs and do them,  
but we must also restrain ourselves,

so that we don't think that the only activities we should do are those that congregation members see.

Today's readings remind us that pastors need to spend their time leading and letting the church members do what God gives them the ability to do. This ministry approach is what we've been calling transformational ministry for the last 4-5 years. In this approach, the role of the pastor is to identify and train folks in the congregation to do ministry. The official leaders don't have to do everything for the people, as Jethro pointed out to Moses. And neither can Moses – or Pastor Paul or I – do everything. No one has all the gifts. God graciously distributes gifts among the entire body of believers. So the question we as pastors and staff need to keep before us continually is not, "What do I need to do today?" but "Who do I need to disciple today?"

The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians and Romans of the variety of gifts that are given to God's people. The gifts given to the leaders, Paul tells us in Ephesians are given

*to equip the saints for the work of ministry,  
for building up the body of Christ.*

Ephesians 4.12

We are each given gifts for service in God's kingdom, to extend hope in Jesus' name. It may be that you're gifted to be a Stephen Minister. It may be that your gifts lie elsewhere. Your challenge, no – your responsibility,

is to discover how God has gifted you  
and to use your gifts in some way.

This is how we live out our baptismal calling  
of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 5.

You may recognize these words,

*Let your light shine before others,  
so that they may see your good works  
and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Matthew 5.16

These words are part of our baptism service,  
as a reminder that our faith is to be lived out  
in ways that others can see.

Not as a way of bringing attention to ourselves,  
but as a way of pointing beyond ourselves,  
illuminating and enfleshing God's love for us in Christ.

It seems to me this is the essence of 'stewardship' –  
not just financial, though that's certainly part of it.

But also, how we use

the emotional and spiritual and practical gifts

God has bestowed on each of us.

A gift given but never used is eventually wasted.

Nicolo Paganini the great 18th century Italian violinist,  
willed his fine instrument to his home city of Genoa.

His bequest carried one condition.

The violin was never to be played;

it would simply be placed on display.

But that's not good for a finely crafted stringed instrument.

It needs to be used and handled regularly

if its beauty and value are to be retained.

As a result of Paganini's request,

his marvelous violin has become nothing more

than a decaying form.  
It has wasted away as a museum piece.<sup>ii</sup>

The same wasting happens when we continually sit on the sidelines not using the gifts God has given us. While we all need times when we are filled and restored after a particularly busy season, eventually, like a sponge saturated with water, the only way we can be useful is to be used, to be squeezed, so that we can come back again to be refilled. A sponge filled but left on the kitchen sink eventually becomes moldy and dried out and rock hard; unfit for any use whatsoever.

God has so much more in store for us!  
Whether as a Stephen Minister,  
or as someone working behind the scenes in the office,  
or on a short term ministry team,  
or in the food pantry, or with our youth ministry,  
or in our Sunday School ministry, or in our music ministry,  
God has a place set just for you; that only you can fill.  
Whether you're a long time member or first time worship guest,  
or somewhere in between, there's a place for you  
in ministry here; come and see!

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace* (NY: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), 27.

<sup>ii</sup> *10,000 Sermon Illustrations* (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2000.