

Sermon – 16th Pentecost
Psalm 146 and Mark 7:24-37
September 9, 2018
“Stephen Ministry – That Welcome Knock at the Door”

I sat in my living room chair on an October morning, one foot elevated on an ottoman, the other immersed in a washtub of hot soapy water. The pain in my foot was owing to an ingrown toenail, which isn't pleasant. But it paled in comparison to the pain owing to the fact I was soaking my foot on a Friday morning, when I should have been at work and would have been aching toe and all – if I hadn't been laid off – well let's call it what it was – fired from my job a week or so before. There I was, now over a year out of college, reading want-ads from the Minneapolis and St. Paul papers my folks sent me, waiting for a return call from the Minnesota Department of Workforce Security – otherwise known as the unemployment office.

I was not in a rosy mood to say the least – mad, sad, embarrassed, worried and a half dozen other moods of various shapes and sizes all present and accounted for, when I heard a knock and a voice from the door. It was my former pastor, Terje Hausken (now the late Pastor Hausken), who let himself in and sat down. What a coincidence I thought, my friend stopping by even though he lived in a town 60 miles to the south. Except that he didn't just “stop by”, he was sent, by the person Terje had arranged I meet a year or so earlier and would soon be my fiancé.

Small talk is not my forte, nor was it Terje's so he brushed aside my tepid attempts to explain he happened to catch me at home because I was nursing my big toe. He knew full well I was nursing a big hurt. How else do you explain how it felt to have your boss call you in to her office on Friday afternoon and say “*you weren't working out*” before handing you a final check? Terje listened, relayed how he'd contended with failure a time or two himself, and then said something I'll never forget – “*Ken, the only thing God wants you to feel right now is his pleasure in you. Forget what your boss thought of you and let go of what you think of yourself.*” If I do say so myself, in retrospect it was a pretty good pastoral call!

I wish I could say that when Terje left the phone rang and it was someone calling with a job offer. That didn't happen. I eventually got that call from that department of workplace something or another and a few month's unemployment checks kept me afloat. I got a job by Christmas and it worked out pretty well. But I will never forget the 45 minutes or so a caring Christian spent on me. Which is why I am so glad and hope filled to be part of the commissioning of seven Stephen Ministers in our congregation this weekend.

Last time we learned that when the Holy Spirit calls a person to faith in Jesus – kindness is one of the fruits of the Spirit they are gifted with. But not all are gifted with compassion – comfortable in the presence of someone who is suffering and patient enough to walk with them through it. Paul said we're not to elevate any gift above another, yet he did say celebrate the gifts you have been given. Compassion is the gift we recognize this weekend in our Stephen Ministers. And I do hope many of you will receive the gift they offer, for yourself or someone else you know. I doubt I would have ever called my former pastor Terje – someone else did that for me.

In our lesson today from Mark there are two distinct stories of healing, yet in each case the healing is sought on behalf of someone else. In the first story a mom comes for her child and in the second someone - who exactly we don't know – came on behalf of a man who could neither speak nor hear. That's an important but overlooked detail. Both the mom, as I suppose you would expect and those “others” had the gift of

compassion - someone's hurt, hurt them enough to seek Jesus whom they believed would not only feel it but heal it. There are a lot of ways I could describe Stephen Ministry, but right today the best I can think of is on display right here in this lesson - people bringing folks a bit closer to Jesus, whose mercy heals.

None of the seven folks we commission this weekend has any inkling that when they meet with someone and offer distinctively Christian care they'll cure them. Grief takes its own sweet time subsiding, anxiety and depression may never fully leave a person alone, getting new skills and the confidence to find a job to put them to use at after you've lost one can take a while, babies are bundles of joy but also loads of work, and sometime families, loving as they are, have listened as much as they can.

None of what you or someone you know may feel will surprise our Stephen Ministers What matters to them, no matter how long it takes – is that you feel certain nothing can separate you from the love of Jesus Christ – no matter how hard it tries! I'll never forget the day a caring Christian said to me “*Ken, the only thing God wants you to feel right now is his pleasure in you.*” Despite our lesson from Mark, I want to assure you none of our ministers were trained in the use of spit...but they were in how to listen, encourage, and remain till God's pleasure not the world's pain is what that very special person they minister to feels. Despite our inclinations to the contrary, there are some things we can't do on our own. How wonderful to know we don't have to. How wonderful to have Savior who does all things well. **AMEN**