

By Michael Slayter

Scripture:

Isaiah 40: 28-31

Romans 12:6-8

A Matter of Balance

When I was stationed overseas in the Air Force, we were at a small base and frequently had visiting personnel from other bases to 'fill-in' for temporary vacancies. We once had a visiting flight surgeon from a base in Germany. I think he packed his clothes a little on the light side because he wore his flight suit everywhere we saw him. The wife of our hospital commander was unflappable and never missed a detail about new people. She noticed this doctor who seemed more preoccupied with his flying image than his primary profession. One day she approached him outside the Officers' Club and asked him, "Just what is it that you do?" He pointed to his wings and answered, "Well, I'm a flight surgeon." The commander's wife rolled her eyes and said, "I can see that! What I asked was what do you do?"

Today we are going to think about what we are and what we do.

In many churches, there can be lots of talk about the worship service. People put a great deal of emphasis on the structure of the worship service. It's very visible and we do it as a group. And we do it our way. Worship is important and necessary. Worship committees work hard to make it meaningful. I know because I have been on worship committees. It's hard work. But it is not the entirety of our Christian journey.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quoted as saying, "So there is no area of the church which is not wholly and exclusively subject to Christ. It is a dreadful reduction of the New Testament concept if today the church is often seen to have its existence only in preaching and the administration of the sacrament."

Another author, Charles Ringma, embellishes this by saying, "Church is not always an attractive place. It often consists of certain ceremonies, worship, and sermons. The church can be a far more attractive place than that. But its attractiveness need not lie in making those ceremonies more tantalizing. It should lie in expanding the notion of what it means to be the church. Church is the life together of those who belong to Christ and meet together – not only for common worship, but also for companionship, hospitality, friendship, common concerns, and participating in the joys and struggles of life."

If someone stopped you as you were leaving church on Sunday and asked what do you do, what would you answer? Be careful, it might be someone like the commander's wife. If you just say I am a Christian, she would say, "I can see that!"

Maybe we should periodically ask ourselves that question. What do we take with us as we leave this building every Sunday? There's a book entitled *EVIDENCE THAT DEMANDS A VERDICT*. The author, Josh Macdowell, says if Jesus was not the Son of God, he deserves an academy award for acting. He was either the Son of God or a man very much out of his mind. But no one could ever make the claims he did and yet be such a sound, solid, holy example of evidence to follow. I don't think anyone in here today would deny who Jesus really is. Anyone who calls himself or herself a Christian has just crossed the Rubicon. You can't walk away from it. You can't turn back. It's not just a casual statement.

But speaking of evidence of God, where did you get yours? Worship on Sunday is one place; a good place to begin. But Jesus made it clear that we are to have a personal experience with him. Personal experience through doing, not just worship on Sunday. We hear how more and more of our society are among the non-churched. If they don't have worship as their beginning, where will they get their evidence? How will they be invited to start their Christian journey? If they get any at all, they get it from you, from what you do outside of worship. If you consider yourself a Christian, you are being watched. You are their evidence. So, what message are you sending?

Will you be evidence for others to see? Will you be the face of God to someone? We have four new Stephen Ministers here today who have clearly made that choice.

For those of you who are not familiar with Stephen Ministry, it is a complete system of recruiting, training, and managing dedicated volunteers who have decided to be a beacon of light to those who are going through some of the turmoil that life sometimes brings. This recognition indicates the completion of approximately 50 hours of training focused on delivering distinctively Christian care to others.

The body of Christ has many parts and we each have to find our role. Maybe you don't know what God's will is for you. We all go through that. Start by listening to that quiet still voice. From it, get an idea of what you think God has in store for you, then present to God for his approval. Find God's will in small steps. You'll know when you land on the right thing, facing in the right direction.

It is a matter of balance between worship and service. So often we focus on only one priority at a time while neglecting others. That balance cannot be achieved by clever methods and single-minded tunnel vision. It can only be achieved by the personal wisdom that comes from experience.

Our New Testament scripture today tells us of the importance of all ministries; members in the choir, managers of the food pantry, workers in the nursery, those who feed others on a monthly basis, and so many others - we applaud all of you and you deserve recognition. The Apostle Paul mentions several gifts that people may have and notice that he does not prioritize them. He makes no mention of which is more important. For a church to be without any of those with gifts would be like having a missing body part.

We have before us today a small group of people who have found their niche for the next 2 years. These four are bringing closure to a training period that has been a journey in itself. Fifty hours of training seems like a daunting task when you first look at it, but like all good things, the experience is worth the effort. After today, you will hear about Stephen Ministry, but you won't hear of the personal details; we don't talk about them – we can't talk about them. I cannot emphasize that enough. Our work with individuals will be as confidential as private conversations with the pastor. But we need you to be our eyes and ears. Stephen Ministers cannot be everywhere, just like the pastor can't be everywhere. So this congregation needs to generate a level of awareness. In order to help us, there should be a focus on people struggling in a broken world. We need you to understand and be aware of Stephen Ministry so you can tell others about it. It is not just for members of this church, but anyone whom you cross paths with in the course of each day. Folks have asked us how we find those who need our help. Often, they come to us directly. There is also a referral process through a third party. It is simple, but you must be aware of the confidential nature of what we do. When you become aware of someone going through hard times, let them know that there is a care-giving ministry here in this church that is solid, reliable, and confidential. Explain that it is a listening ministry that is distinctly Christian with no hidden agenda of recruiting church members or coercive spirituality. If they are interested in such help, ask their permission to bring it to the attention of a Stephen Minister and we will take it from there. Always ask for their permission first. If the answer is "No" then let it be. It's their choice.

The great bible scholar, William Barclay says, "The true Christian loves Christ and loves his fellow men. More than that, he knows that he cannot show his love to Christ in any better way than by showing his love to his fellow men." Indeed, the motto of Stephen Ministry is 'Christ caring for people through people.' We emphasize that next to God's grace, our most treasured possession is self-esteem. Self-esteem is injured when people are burdened by life's troubles. They need to know that they are loved and accepted, just as God loves and accepts them.

One of the greatest gifts we can give others is ourselves. We become Christ-like shepherds when we offer consolation and comfort in moments of crisis when we say don't be afraid, I know what you are going through and I am living it with you. You are not alone. That is the basic message of Stephen Ministry.

You will remember a couple of years back, US Airways flight 1549 made an emergency landing on the Hudson River. The pilot was Chesley Sullenberger, better known as “Sully.” From the moment of the bird impact on both engines until the time the plane settled in those cold waters, only 3 minutes had elapsed. He did not have time to stop and look it up in the flight manual. He didn’t have time to mull it over or do a few trial runs. No, he acted out of second nature because that was his character. Flying safely was his virtue and he had a well-practiced process already in place. I am going to challenge these new Stephen Ministers to make distinctively Christian care become second nature. You have the training and you have God on your side. Think of today’s Old Testament scripture. It’s a winning combination and you will be a different person from here on. God bless you.

Amen