

The Great Denial

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Matthew 25:34-40 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothed you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ And the king will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

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The poet, William Blake, was born in England in the mid-1700s. Among many other things, he wrote these words:

“I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see;
I sought my God, but my God eluded me;
I sought my neighbor and found all three.”

Once, when I took a creative writing course, our instructor told us that no story has power unless there is conflict in the scenes or between the characters. He told us to reach down into our personal experiences, think

of a conflict we had gone through, then write about it. He didn't mean go home and think about it, he wanted it on his desk in 20 minutes. But, one last point of instruction was, "Don't put your name on it." At the end of 20 minutes, he collected the papers and began reading them – out loud. When class concluded that day, one student remarked, "I didn't realize what a broken world we live in."

Not just some of us, all of us.

And do not think for one second that God does not know just how broken it is. Throughout the bible, Old and New Testament, the stories are full of relationships between people. That word, 'relationship' comes in all colors and tones and none of us – none of us – can avoid that word. If there's but one thing we are stuck with in this life, it is that we are all connected.

Relationships cannot be avoided

But, let's face it; experiencing or witnessing conflict is painful. Trying to overlook it because you don't know what to do or you don't want to lose your composure or any other excuse – that's painful for *you* as well.

Watching disaster on the news, seeing people who have lost everything, realizing that there are people who go to sleep at night hungry; these are all extreme examples of misfortune in this broken world and we throw up emotional walls for protection because it's painful to watch.

But, these extreme examples are just that – extreme, and therefore, rare, at least around here. The vast majority of our population does not experience these catastrophic things. But, what is more common and hidden below

the surface are the events that don't make the news; the divorce, the death of a loved one, loss of a job, foreclosure on a house, a teenage child gone wayward, the burden of getting older – the list goes on. And because these kinds of things don't make the news, they are very easy to ignore. And to justify ignoring it, we use terms and phrases like *strength*, *standing tall*, *manhood*, and here's the best – *it's not my problem!*

It is our great denial; denial that it's real; denial that we can help; denial that it should ever happen to us.

No one, myself included, wants to go around looking for morbid sadness, and no one is saying that you should. But if you open your eyes, it will be right in front of you; you won't have to look far to see it. Hardly a day goes by that we don't see someone in need, someone in pain, or someone who is alone. And you can be alone in a crowd, even in a crowd of family. Witnessing someone in distress never comes at a convenient time, so we just look the other way and say it's just not real. 'I can't save the whole world,' you say. 'I'm looking for the upbeat, the positive, the good stuff, and the happy tones.' In South Louisiana, the Cajun people say, "*Laissez les bons temps rouler.*" That means, "Let the good times roll." When you see that guy who's going through a miserable experience, remember he's looking for the good times, too. Doesn't he deserve joy, the same as you do? But life has dealt him a raw deal and he can't see the good stuff because the garbage of life is in the way.

What does Psalm 22 say? In verse 11 it says, "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help."

No one? It does not have to be that way.

But we're an impatient, fix-it society and we know what can be done. We'll send some food over there, some form of housing to another place, Red Cross care packages to victims. There can be no doubt that such gifts are helpful and needed and I do not discount them in the least. But, how much of yourself do you give? Jesus saw a poor widow come into the temple and give two pennies, all she had. If you read this account carefully, you see it is not about the amount you give but all about how much of yourself is included?

And with these gifts of money, food, clothing, you should feel good about what you have done. I know I do! But, in tragedy, there's a different kind of damage we don't see. Even after the physical losses are attended to, there is the ache in the heart; piercing the soul; despair that defies definition. And here's the key point, we don't have to have fire or floods or famine to break a heart, to pierce a soul. It frequently happens in hidden, subtle ways. Two facts surface regarding this kind of hurt: first, the best ingredient toward a cure is to have someone who can listen, and the second fact is that most people don't know how.

My point is this: there is a smoldering cloud of pain all around us that no one wants to talk about. It's the elephant in the room. There are people you come across every day who need the help of someone willing to give a little bit of themselves.

So, let us dig a little deeper. In the second chapter of John's Gospel, when Mary told Jesus that the wine was all gone, we hear Jesus say, "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" This verse always throws me a little off-balance. But, I heard a wonderful interpretation of this verse, in which Jesus is essentially asking, '*What impact do the needs of others have on me?*' Ask yourself that question. Stated another way, '*Does their plight impinge on my life or force me to examine my conscience?*' Later, in the 21st chapter of John, we hear Jesus ask three times of Peter, "Do you love me?" Each time Peter answers, Jesus tells him to do something having to do with caring for others. I have often wondered why Jesus asked him THREE times. I think it was to make the point unmistakably clear: If you love Jesus, you will care for others in some way.

Obviously, this is not the only time Jesus has spoken about our connection with others. In Matthew, we have read today the parable of the king who said if we have done these things for others, we have done it for him.

The parable in Matthew 25 is one of the most vivid parables Jesus ever spoke. The lesson is crystal clear. We will be judged by our action because it reflects our heart. We are not judged by our knowledge, our wealth, our fame, but on the care we have shown in our hearts.

Much of Stephen Ministry is focused around these verses from Matthew. There are several things about this passage in Matthew that could be pointed out and I want to mention three of them.

1. The help involves simple things. A meal to a hungry man. A cup of cold water. A welcome to a stranger. We're not talking about rocket science. We are asked to see God, and Jesus, in the people around us.
2. It means the help should be uncalculating. It must be a natural, instinctive reaction of a loving heart. It's almost as though the one giving help could not stop from doing it.
3. The wonderful truth of it is that all help of this type is also helping Him. That's not just a shallow, meaningless rhetoric. It shows the face of Christ to someone who suddenly finds God hard to see or believe in. When misfortune strikes, God can seem so far away; but, you probably already knew that.

If Jesus was visibly present here today, we might say, "Lord, I didn't know that was you! Why didn't you say something? If we had known, we would have behaved differently." Jesus would probably reply, "Those in need are made in our Father's image. Isn't that enough?"

I have always said there are many ministries in a church and all are various parts of the body of Christ. I would be the last one to ever say that one is more important than the others. So, let's talk closer to home: What a strong sense of fulfillment we find in feeding the hungry. And when I see those Christmas boxes that went out to so many faraway places, I think of the joy it will create. The ministries we have supported in Madagascar and Cuba shall never go unnoticed. And when you consider that many churches are doing these same things together with us, we feel unified as a

single church. That's what the communion of saints is all about. But sometimes, something else is needed besides feeding the hungry or sending out Christmas boxes. In that something else, we first need to examine what personal gifts God has given us as tools. Do not shortchange yourself into a narrow, limited mind set.

Here's a real example of someone who found the gift God had given him: One of the most effective Stephen Ministers I have ever come across was a retired ex-marine who looked like he could play linebacker for the Greenbay Packers. But, it never once entered his head that his masculinity was too fragile to deal with the feelings of others. He had a gift for operating outside of the box. Kids in our church in Massachusetts loved him and male members of the church respected him. When I say he was effective, for six months, he served as a Stephen Minister to a retired Roman Catholic priest. He was patient and powerful, a real man of God who never cast himself in a role that restricted how he served God. That's how I characterize him.

His relationship with this priest was a success story. One in which someone unashamedly asked for help and the help was there in the mind of a trained individual who was and is one of the most dedicated Christian men I have ever had the privilege of knowing. I wish I were half the man he is.

But, in so many cases, there are people whose hearts are breaking and there's no one there to help. And even if there were, many do not know how to ask for help. You see, we all have painful thoughts from time to time

and we just don't talk about them. Why? It is because your mother and father told you to not bother other people with your troubles, but mostly because there is no one willing to listen. No one to listen without passing judgment on you. To listen without trying to rush you into a fix-it solution. To listen as Jesus would listen, without any thought of reward for the listening.

Can you imagine what it feels like to help another human being find his or her own solution to get through a rough time? I can tell you, it feels great and in an unselfish way!

So back to the words of Matthew 25 in which Christ said, "When you do this to the least of my brethren, you do it to Me." It tells us when you give of your time, you do it for Him!

When you listen, really listen to someone else's grief, you do it for Him!

When you validate the feelings of someone who feels alone in a cruel world, you do it for Him!

When you help someone heal from the wounds of loss and fear, you do it for Him!

When we learn the type of generosity which, without reward, helps others in the simplest ways, we then know the joy of helping Jesus Himself.

Notice I used the word "Learn." There is the right way and the wrong way. But don't use this as an excuse to do nothing. I heard a cute story recently. What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Presbyterian? You get someone who knocks on every door, but can't think of anything to

say. Stephen Ministry will not teach you to knock on doors, but we will teach you what to say – and what NOT to say; how to hear someone else's travail and keep it to yourself. We'll teach you about boundaries and about how to help without being pulled into the whirlpool of someone else's despair. But, most of all, we will teach you how to listen, really listen; not just 'waiting for my turn to talk'. Listen in such a way that the other person knows that you care. Listen in such a way that you give someone else a voice, in such a way that you empower them to overcome their burden of grief.

When God gives you a gift of doing anything, He gives it with the chance to learn how to do it well. Isaiah speaks of serving under the shadow of God's hand. We are God's tools and what a privilege we feel to be included in His quiver with other sharpened, skilled arrows, all with a job to do and the means to do it with His guidance and firm hand. One could say this about Stephen Ministry, singing in the choir, leading a bible study, teaching Sunday School, serving on session, anywhere God leads you. Once you begin to see God's hand in your life, you will know that his workmanship within you and through you was tailor-made, just for you. His design for your life pulls together every thread of your existence into a magnificent work of art. Every thread matters and has a purpose.

What is your vision of your calling? Does it include caring for others on a personal basis? If so, you may be hearing the call to become a Stephen Minister. If prayerful conversation with God brings you to the conclusion that you are being called to that ministry or any ministry, don't ignore the calling! Answer it! Not everyone will have the calling to Stephen Ministry,

but I feel sure there are those of you who hear it, but you may have doubts as well. Talk to us, tell us your doubts. You may have nothing to fear.

God willing, we will start a new class of Stephen Ministers in January. One nice thing about the training you will receive is that it becomes a part of you and you take it with you. I can assure you, from then on you will see people in a different light. Listen to God and think about joining us.

Amen.