

Sacred Spaces 10-23-22

Good morning. I am Helen Phillips, the outgoing coordinator of Stephen Ministry. This is Jana Honermann, the incoming coordinator. We are delighted to celebrate this Stephen Ministry Sunday with you.

Mat 18: 20 “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

We are gathered here today and Jesus is in our midst. This is a sacred space where we experience grace just as Moses experienced God’s grace in the sacred space surrounding the burning bush.

John Agner recently reported on a book in our library called The Listening Road by Neil Tomba. He bicycled across the country listening to people’s stories. In the end, he said, “Although we didn’t agree on all things, I simply listened, allowing *spaces of grace* to form around their words.”

When we as Stephen Ministers listen to our care receivers, we also create a sacred spaces of grace where Jesus is present with us. Both the care receiver and the Stephen Minister receive grace to draw nearer to God and see Him at work in their lives.

The sacred surrounds us and only awaits our awareness and our acknowledgement of it. Pastor Diane did a devotion recently on Jacob’s ladder. When Jacob awoke, he said, “Surely God was in this place, and I was not aware of it.”

She compared sacred spaces with “thin places”—the place where the line between heaven and earth seems paper thin—a place where the presence of God is so strong that you cannot ignore it.

As Stephen Ministers, we begin by responding to the sacred space within our own relationship with Jesus. Our personal devotion times prepare us to be aware of his presence. Praying before we meet with our care receiver brings the Holy Spirit actively into the relationship.

Linda Goodwin, a pediatric chaplain, wrote a book called Sacred Space. She defines sacred space as a time and space designated to the awareness of and attentiveness to the presence of the Holy. In it, we enter into God's time. She describes how love, mercy, and grace are touchstones of a chaplain's shared sacred space as they listen to and respond to someone's story of a situation or a struggle that weighs heavily on the heart. This is also very true of Stephen Ministers.

She says, "Although I could not stop suffering, I could alleviate the suffering by accompanying others in their painful struggle, by gently reminding them of God's love and presence in their difficulties and by embodying an attitude of reverence for God."

Not every time that we meet with our care receiver is there an epiphany. That is true in all of life. Trusting God for the unseen is an important part of our faith. But some of our Stephen Ministers and Care Receivers have shared what those sacred space experiences were like. These are totally confidential but used with permission.

From a CR: When my husband was diagnosed with cancer, my pastor suggested a Stephen Minister. It's difficult to convey how important this Stephen Ministry relationship was for me. Our pastor was wonderful, and we had an amazing amount of support from many other people, but the time I spent with my Stephen Minister was the only time in the week when I could truly focus on my own needs. She was there just for me. My Stephen Minister let me know that, while she was very concerned for my husband, her role was to be my support—to listen and help me process what I was feeling and going through, without giving advice or telling me what to do. The consistency of our Stephen Ministry relationship was crucial in helping me cope. Her weekly visits became an anchor in my life—something I could rely on when everything else was so uncertain. She was a steady reminder of God's presence, helping me know I was never alone.

From a SM: We can connect through ordinary moments and situations, which in turn become blessings. The activity can be as simple as a game of

cribbage or as complex as holding my Care Receiver's hand while he was breathing his last breaths. I know God was present and believe my CR's felt his scared presence as well. The game of cribbage was much more than a game. While playing the hand, we would talk about his family, childhood experiences, where his family was living and their accomplishments. A calm would come to his face as we were talking. One time I knocked on his door, and hearing no response, entered his room. He seemed to be sleeping. I sat down next to his Lazy Chair and waited in our "Sacred Space". After several minutes of waiting, I stood up to leave. I was shocked when my CR said rather loudly, "I thought we were going to play some cribbage", which we did. I was fortunate enough to be in his assisted care room, along with several of his family, the last day of his life.

The "Sacred Spaces" leading me to holding the hand of another CR as he was drawing his last breaths was much more complex. We had met for a couple of years when his wife found it necessary to place him in an assisted care home due to increasing dementia. I would visit the home once a week where I was always greeted by my CR with a great smile. Although verbal communication had ceased, a feeling of the sacred was present. The last time my CR and I shared our "Sacred Space" was on a day that we did not usually meet. On that day my wife needed to be at a place near to where my care receiver was living. I dropped my wife off where she needed to be and continued to my care receiver's assisted care home. It was evening and he was sitting in bed. There was a slight smile of recognition when I took his hand. Nothing was said. His wife said he passed to the Lord shortly after I left our "Sacred Space".

Another CR says: I'd been struggling with some spiritual wounds that were pretty intense and needed healing— things I didn't want to share with family and friends. But on that visit, as my Stephen Minister walked next to me, I felt safe and comfortable. So I shared my deepest hurts with her—some really painful things that I feared she might judge me for and that made me wonder if God could possibly love me. After I told her those things, I was really nervous and dreading her response. I was worried that she would

think I was an awful person. But instead, she put her arm around me and said, “I’m sorry you had to go through that.” And that was a turning point for me. To go from fear of judgment to a positive affirmation of care, empathy—and even sorrow for what I’d been through—it was so meaningful. That’s when I began to feel God’s love again.

More SM experiences: One of my most rewarding experiences was when I was reading devotion to my care receiver and she expressed doubt that she was actually “saved”. This gave me the opportunity to share the path to salvation with her. I could not have done this on my own. I know God provided me with the words to share with her to make her feel confident that she would be in the presence of God when her time came. We prayed and I asked the Holy Spirit to bless and be with my care receiver. Once again, sacred space was created.

SM: I have been blessed with having had my Care Receiver for several years and experienced a growing relationship. This is a special time of sharing Sacred Spaces together. We had a discussion after a Church service using a text from the Book of Revelations. My Care Receiver suggested we study the entire book. I was OK with his thinking but was Revelations the easiest starting point? Maybe the blind leading the blind? We tackled it and amazing things happened. We wrestled with it a Chapter at a time with some help from a Study Bible, prayer and a health curiosity of where God was leading us.

Both of us were brought up with the belief on how God’s story of hope continues. This time the words and descriptions in Revelations took on renewed meaning and hope for us. We continue meeting together and both find the Spirit leading us into His special Sacred Spaces.

SM: Many times, I went to visit my Stephen Minister thinking what good am I? what can I say? But praying before the visit, I trusted God to provide the right words and the patience to just listen. Many times I was surprised at the directions the conversation took because God was in charge. She would often tell me that I was just the right person for her at the time—a gift from

God. That makes me feel God's love, too. And I would carry the feeling the presence of God with me as I left.

We as Stephen Ministers cannot stop the suffering, but we can walk with you in your pain. We cannot fix your problems, but we can listen to them without passing judgment. Just being able to talk to someone often helps clarify what to do. We can hold your hand or pray with you if you wish. But the most important thing we do is bring the Holy Spirit into the sacred space of our relationship.

Not matter what your concern—big or small—it's big to you! Sometimes someone will say, "I don't need one. Others need a SM more than me." NO! You are important and we're here to walk with you and listen to provide spaces for God's grace to enter into your life. We are all jars of clay in order to show God's surpassing power in our lives. Whatever is pressing on you, perplexing you, striking you down, we are here for you to support you so that Jesus' life may shine forth in you.

How safe is it to not bother a Stephen Minister when you are weeping inside or really angry with the world even though you present a brave mask to the world? If you are suffering in any way, we urge you to join hands with a Stephen Minister to walk beside you as you cross through the troubled waters. Jesus is holding you and your Stephen Minister as you walk through them together. That is a true sacred place.

If you would like to have a Stephen Minister, we have many who wish to care for you. Carolyn Hill is our women's referral coordinator and Bob Lillie our men's coordinator. (**Stand up, please**) They will prayerfully match you up with the right Stephen Minister for you. Just call the church office or each of them directly.

Would all our active Stephen Ministers please stand? Would all who have been commissioned as a Stephen Minister at any time please stand? **Thank you all for your caring service.**