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The Apostle Paul stands out in the Book of Acts. He's the central character and carries the message of Christ throughout the ancient world into synagogues, homes and communities. He, along with the other disciples are key figures in Early Christianity...but in today's passage we hear of a Spirit-led community and lay leaders like Stephen, who are ready to make decisions, lead the early church and serve others, in order to be obedient to the Spirit.

The Bible has many stories that seem insignificant, and yet, these stories teach us how God works in the daily lives of his people. The early church didn't know how to organize themselves; they had no specific plan to grow, or any blueprint on how to do church. And then a conflict, significant problem arises in our story: the widows of the Greek-speaking Jews are not getting enough food. No one is caring for them. They feel neglected, overlooked, unloved. There was a long tradition of care of the poor within the synagogue under the guidance of the Hebrew Jews. Most likely they favored their own kind first before the Greek-speaking Jews. ***Funny how church conflicts get started, huh?***

Yet, the disciples get right to work. This is a defining moment for the disciples, for the early church and for the others who follow the disciples' teachings of Jesus. Luke, the author of Acts, wants us to feel this important transition in the story of the church.

The Holy Spirit fills the disciples and the community with **knowledge, vision, and courage** (here are three great leadership qualities). Together they work out how to care for those in need, in order that they might still be able to pray and proclaim the story of Jesus. Here we see for the first time "Leadership" within the early Christian church that manifests itself because of the needs of the community. Leadership, surprisingly, arises from below, from the people's need for guidance and service. But leadership also comes from above; it is a gift of the Lord.

The disciples called everyone in the community together. They explained the problem (Greek widows being neglected in food distribution) and they sought a solution. They made a decision, a significant if not critical decision to alleviate the situation. The community decided they needed others besides the disciples to help those in need. They chose people, strong in faith and full of wisdom to help out.

While the Bible talks specifically about food distribution, I'm sure there were a number of other things needed by people on the margins, abandoned by their community. We still have them today. We walk by them in downtown cities all across America. We hear their plight in the news. We see the flooding in the

low-lying areas where they live. We know that millions in this country live below the poverty line. It's 46 million, about 1 in every 6 Americans. *Staggering!*

“So many needs and only one of me,” words said by Ken Haugk after he had finished seminary and completed a degree in clinical psychology and begun ministry. He felt ready to help others through his ministry, but didn't realize how many needs were out there. He knew he couldn't do it by himself.

The disciples and the early Christian community felt the same way. The disciples couldn't keep the prayers going and spreading God's word without finding other people who could provide help to those in need. And it's the same today. Our churches and communities have people with many needs, hurts, loss of hope, being overlooked, neglected, abandoned. It is overwhelming at times for us to think of all the needs in this world. And that is equally true in Green Valley.

Where do we start?

For me and my faith: one person at a time is all God asks of us. Help one person this day. Give them a shred of hope, a glimmer of God's merciful love, a kindness that they can carry away from their encounter with you. Listen to their story. Find some common ground. Accept their humanity and situation. Kindness inspires kindness and gives hope to the hopeless.

The first lay ministry begins in our scripture today; this is the earliest form of Christians helping people because of their belief in Jesus' promises. We have

Stephen and six others; men, full of the Spirit and of good report. I hear integrity and faithfulness (more leadership qualities). No wonder, Dr. Ken Haugk, named his caregiving ministry after Stephen, calling it Stephen Ministry.

Today we celebrate nine new Stephen Ministers, men and women of faith with good report, integrity. They will not distribute food, but in our world, they will distribute care; compassionate, loving care through listening skills and mutual acceptance; two more leadership qualities.

Begun in 1975, Stephen Ministry has now trained over 600,000 individual ministers and lay leaders, serving 12,000 congregations in 170 different Christian denominations in the U.S., Canada, and 27 other countries. Here at VPC, our Stephen Ministers served over 1700 hours last year alone. That's almost one full-time staff person in Pastoral Care. Pretty cool, huh?

And we are all called to this daily distribution of care. We are called to "be there" for those in need, just as Christ is always there for us. We don't have to be trained as Stephen Ministers but we can listen carefully, accept people where they are and care for them. We can walk with the needy and do so in a confidential manner.

We are called to be full of the Holy Spirit, and wise with integrity and faithfulness because this pleases the community. In our story the number of disciples and followers of Jesus increased because the prayers never stopped; the

word of God was not silenced. The early church chose Stephen to lead their lay leaders. And God chooses you and me to do what we can to help others. Amen.