

How To Get Through with a Few Less Bruises
Caring Ministry Recognition Weekend
Acts 6

Nov 7, 2021

Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - In the name of God's love, Jesus' example, and the Spirit's presence, give us the courage to do something. Amen

Message

I woke up this morning
Saw a world full of trouble now, thought
How'd we ever get so far down, and
How's it ever gonna turn around
So I turned my eyes to Heaven
I thought, "God, why don't You do something?"
Well, I just couldn't bear the thought of
People living in poverty
Children sold into slavery
The thought disgusted me
So, I shook my fist at Heaven
Said, "God, why don't You do something?"
God said, "I did, yeah, I created you"

Those are the lyrics of Matthew West's song "Do Something," which came out on his 2012 album called Into the Light.

West penned those words after hearing the story of Andrea, a former University of Colorado student who chose to spend a semester abroad learning micro-financing in Uganda. While there, she happened upon an orphanage in critical condition. The children were being badly neglected and even abused. Her heart broke for these orphans who had no advocate; no voice, and no future. That's when Andrea decided to do something. She called her parents and said, "I'm not coming home." She refused to leave these children until something was done to improve the conditions.

In an interview with West, he explained that "By sheer determination and refusal to give up, Andrea and her sister convinced the Ugandan government to close down that orphanage, which left about forty children with no place to go. The government handed the children to her. Andrea brought this need back to the States with a new vision and desire to create a safe place for these children to grow and learn. Today, Musana (which means 'sunshine') is a thriving orphanage in Iganga, Uganda, housing over one hundred children! Andrea prefers spending most of her time in Uganda, not the US. She's a long way from a sorority house or a college campus. She's reaching the world, and bringing hope to people, one helpless child at a time." When asked what it was that made her fight for these children she simply said, "I just kept thinking, 'if I don't do something, who will?'" (www.songfacts.com)

How many of you have stood before God and asked the same or similar question? How many of you have raised your voice, shook your fist and asked, "Why don't you do something?" Why don't you take the pain away? Why don't you ease the burden? Why don't you help the process? Make things easier?

We look at our world today and it is hard not to ask why? Why don't you fix it God? Why don't you end the fighting? Why don't you provide a way for peace? Why do you let it go on and on? Why don't you make them see what is right and wrong? Why don't you do something God, after all you are God?!

Andrea's story takes us by the shoulders and boldly reminds us that the whole time we are raising our voices and shaking our fists, God is saying, "Oh but I did, I did do something. I created you. I created you to be the vessels of my creativity, wisdom, strength, power, and force for good. I created you to embody the characteristics and qualities of my unconditional love, unending grace, selfless compassion, endless mercy, genuine forgiveness, and ongoing care.

When we look at the men and women of the bible, we see how the power, strength, wisdom, creativity, care, compassion, and love of God was revealed through their lives. We see how because they did something, God was able to do something. We see that the love and care of Christ is embodied in the decisions, choices, and actions of those who follow his example. We see that because they did something, Christ did something through them.

That is the heart of Stephen Ministry - doing something - caring for others - being vessels of hope, strength, and encouragement. It is about helping others through difficult and challenging situations and circumstances; doing something, being present, walking alongside another pilgrim on the journey so that when they come through the other side, they have a few less bruises.

This model of caring ministry was born out of the words of Luke as recorded in the book of Acts chapter six. Listen as we set the stage for what has become one of the most meaningful caring ministries of our day.

READ TEXT - Acts 6:1-7

In these verses, we learn that the early church was made up of a very diverse group of people. Aramaic– speaking Jews who converted to Christianity; Greek – speaking Jews who converted to Christianity – probably at Pentecost and came from various countries; Greek-speaking Gentiles who had converted from polytheism to Christianity. They were divided by language barriers, cultural differences, religious differences; ethnic differences; and variations in the way they had viewed their original faith as Jews. The early Christian church in Jerusalem was a church of thousands. Acts tells us that on the day of Pentecost alone they had 3000 Jews convert to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and that number grew every day. (Acts 2:40-47)

How is that for a new member's class?! Growing the church took a lot of continuous effort on the part of the Twelve Apostles. The twelve preached and taught about Jesus every day in Jerusalem – at the Temple, in homes and on the streets. They were doing exactly what Jesus had told them to do – which was to preach the good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness first in Jerusalem and then to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Many who believed may have been cut off from their families and been seen as radicals of some cult. Acts tells us that they shared everything in common so that no one went without what they truly needed in terms of food, clothing, and shelter. "In the Jewish synagogues there was a routine custom. Collectors went around the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy, partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day this was distributed. Those who were temporarily in need received enough to enable them to carry on; and those who were permanently unable to support themselves received enough for fourteen meals, that is, enough for two meals a day for the ensuing week." William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976) p. 51

"It is obvious from our story today that the Jewish-Christian church had taken over this practice of the Jewish synagogues to help the needy." (Barclay 51)

But an internal problem had developed with how the food for the needy widows was distributed. The Greek speaking widows were not getting their fair share of the food distribution and the Aramaic widows were getting more than their fair share. We are not sure why this problem occurred or who caused it – maybe it was due to language barriers or accidental oversight, cultural variations or just downright discrimination. What we do know is that it was a big problem because the apostles were asked to intervene.

The apostles, serving as pastors of the early church, teaching, preaching, baptizing, healing, instructing, traveling, building partnerships in the surrounding area, and spreading the Word of Jesus, had to figure out a way to care for those who needed it most. They couldn't do it all - their capes weren't that big or that powerful though some [astors even today, like to believe they are. They couldn't do it all and still do everything else they were doing to grow and build the church.

They needed trustworthy, wise, and grounded individuals to help care for this particular group of people. When they went through the list of those who met the qualifications, a man named Stephen was among them.

Thus began the first Stephen Ministry program of the church; a group of caring individuals set aside, trained, and equipped to provide care for those in the church who were suffering, who were being overlooked, who perhaps felt forgotten, left out, and left to figure it out alone.

“Today, more than 11,000 congregations are enrolled in the Stephen Series. They represent more than 160 different Christian denominations and come from all 50 states, 10 Canadian provinces, and 24 other countries. More than 60,000 pastors, church staff, and laypeople have been trained as Stephen Leaders. These Stephen Leaders have, in turn, trained more than 500,000 congregation members to be Stephen Ministers. Since 1975 Stephen Ministers have provided distinctively Christian care to more than a million people in one-to-one Stephen Ministry caring relationships and have also used their caregiving skills to touch the lives of millions of others in informal ways.”

Here at Grace, we have trained 18 Stephen Ministers, 8 currently serving on the leader team and/or as a Stephen Minister. We have helped 26 individuals when their journey has hit a rough patch. Our Stephen Ministers, along with our Care Team are responsible for sending out hundreds of caring cards, making phone calls to follow up, check in and share words of encouragement, and covering our congregation in prayer each and every week.

There are a lot of hurting people right here in our own church and community. There are a lot of people fighting emotional or mental battles and you would never know it by looking at them. There are a lot of people wrestling with tough situations and circumstances every day of the week, even if you don't see it on Saturday night or Sunday morning at church. There are a lot of people struggling with spiritual issues, magnified by Covid19.

It is easy to shake our fists and ask God, "why don't you do something?" Today I encourage you to hear God's response, "I did, I created you." How can you care for each other? For those sitting next to you? Those in your small group or Sunday school class? Those you serve with at Soups On or the Food Pantry? Those you know but haven't really seen in several months due to covid? Maybe it's time to do something?

And for those of you struggling, wrestling, or battling life's circumstances, maybe it's time you do something - take a deep breath and let us help. You do not have to go through it - whatever it is, alone. Reach out and receive a Stephen Minister - someone to talk to, share with, and feel less alone in the struggle. Let us provide the support and care you need to get through it with a few less bruises.

I think our mission statement says it best: Caring Together - Growing Together. This weekend, as we recognize and celebrate our Stephen Ministry and Care Team, let us remember, we are in this together. We are given a biblical model of how to care for one another. We are equipped by the Spirit to walk alongside each other. Whether you need the extra support and care or you can give it, we are all called to do something.

May it be so...AMEN