

12/11 and 12/12 Sermon at ALC

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What a joy it is to stand before you and behold the faces of this family of faith. In Matthew 12:46-50, we are taught: “While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside. Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”

He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” By doing so, he acts as a father to his disciples by forming an artificial family around himself as God’s representative on earth. Disciples are pupils or followers. Those gathering around Jesus are not simply devoted to him in personal allegiance but are reconstituted into a family.

Early Christians used the language of family to express their new relation to God and to one another. “Brother” and “Sister became terms for one’s religious comrades, not a sign of their birth circumstances. Jesus helped women, talked with women, taught women, and was financially supported by women. Women were the first to learn of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ new family begins not at birth but with a conscious choice by his followers to obey God as taught and revealed by Jesus. The only lasting relationship he acknowledges is common obedience to God. In the Mediterranean culture of Jesus’ time, families existed more for productivity, protection, and procreation than for relationship and affection. One’s family was at the least one’s health insurance and Social Security. Those breaking ties with their extended families would pay dearly for it.

With Jesus' last strength on the cross, he showed concern for his mother, committing her into the care of his beloved student. Jesus is concerned about and teaches about the family. Family is good, but Jesus lives for something that is even better: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Note that Jesus claims new brothers and sisters and mothers, but he does not mention a new father. This is the point where Jesus grants the greatest honor to the human family. He chooses a word from family life to describe God: Father. Jesus always prays to his Father in heaven. His only recorded prayer not addressing God as father was when he prayed on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" From our human perspective, Jesus' calling God Father is a great compliment to God.

All his life Jesus gives away his special relationship with God. That relationship is symbolized by each of his follower's calling God Father. He tells his students, "This. Then, is how you should pray: "Our Father....". He bestows upon them his intimacy with God, his directness, his trust, his love. Jesus is God's Son, and so he shares this sonship with all who obey God by following him. God wants everyone as close as Jesus, close enough to call God "Abba".

It's almost too much-God this close? God interested in us? A relationship with the living creator of the universe who holds us so dear and cares about us so deeply that we, along with Jesus, call God Abba?

Jesus points not only to his students gathered around him, declaring them his family. He points to us also. Can you imagine Jesus pointing to us, to you? Right now, visualize his pointing at us and his claiming us as his family. No doubt he is our Lord, but he is also our older brother. He knows his heavenly Father wants us in the family, and he points to us and beckons us to come into the family. We now have the same relationship with God that Jesus does. That's the

special place in God's family he grants us. We didn't earn it. We don't deserve it. Our heavenly Father simply treats us this way because he wants us all home and safe in Jesus' new family.

A good test of our Christian faith is to ask: What similarity do we have to our older brother Jesus? How much do we resemble God, our heavenly Father? When Jesus summons us to follow, he invites us into the middle of life, to live his way, to speak his words and to act toward one another in ways that show family resemblance to our Lord and elder brother, Jesus Christ.

As Jesus' followers, we live the same way he did. We accept society's castoffs. We forgive those who offend us. We work to bring peace where others give up and hate. We listen when we would rather talk, and we try again when we would rather quit. That's the kind of life that Jesus inspires us to live and that God, our loving heavenly Father, empowers us to live.

Jesus' new life and new family take shape right here. They occur now in our midst when we live Jesus' way. Whatever else this church might be, it is Christ's family. We are Christ's living body on earth. Christ's Spirit is within us, among us and around us, inviting us, challenging us, and helping us to live in his loving way.

Here in our church family, God's eternal love is active and playing itself out in our relationships. When you express Christ's practical love for others—whether by sending a card of concern, making a phone call to a lonely person, collecting food bags for the hungry, transporting someone to the doctor, visiting in the hospital, or writing a government representative asking them to support a humane law—you do it as a member of Jesus' family. When you perform that service, your family resemblance shows. Have you noticed the resemblance, been attracted to the resemblance, felt yourself grow into that resemblance?

When you serve Christ in his church, you begin to sense that family resemblance. When you serve in a group, you get to see that resemblance in the other members. Through our Stephen Leaders and Stephen Ministers, our congregation can especially experience this new family of Christ. Stephen Ministers give skilled, disciplined Christian care to those who need it for the sake our Lord Jesus.

At least three things happen as they care for others. The first is clear: They meet other people in their pain and need, and they listen to them, pray for them, and encourage them for the sake of Christ. Second, what occurs around and through and under such caring is that Stephen Leaders and Stephen Ministers draw closer to one another within Christ's new family. Love draws them together, binds them together, and will not let them go. So the third result of the Stephen Minister's work among us is this" Their service can lead the rest of us to greater devotion to our Lord Jesus. Not everyone will be a care receiver—although any of us can be at times in life. Bur all of us can take our rightful place in Christ's family and experience our family resemblance by serving him.

Amid all the mysteries of faith, at least we can understand two important truths. First, God cares for us as a loving parent. We know what parents are. God loves us in the same way as the best parent we could ever imagine. And second, we comprehend that we need to show a family resemblance by living after the example of Jesus. We resemble the Lord we serve in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

But Jesus will always challenge us. We will never perfectly understand him or perfectly obey him. Even when we fail Jesus, to understand his life and his teaching, his grace is sufficient for us. He has died for us to bring us eternally into God's family. He includes us in his life and his family, not because we deserve it, but simply because he loves us. Jesus points at each of us and says, "You. You

are my sisters and brothers. You are my family.” In order to make this assertion eternally true, he died and rose for us so that we will always be welcome in God’s home. He showed us that God is Father, and he created an intimate connection between God and us so that it makes perfect sense for us to call God “Abba” too.

There are some things to remember about our Stephen Ministry team: Often our Stephen Ministers help support family members going through crises, and their care helps keep families strong. Our Stephen Ministers pray as a group, and they pray individually with their care receivers. The more closely they live with God in prayer, the better they are at helping their care receivers. At times, care receivers find that their Stephen Ministers care for them in ways their families never did. Many times the work of Stephen Ministers helps people accept their new identity within Christ’s family.

The book of Exodus relates a story about Moses that takes place after the Israelites were released from slavery in Egypt. It seems that Moses’ father-in-law Jethro visited Moses in the wilderness to bring his wife and children back to him. Jethro witnesses large crowds waiting to meet with Moses because he is their only leader. It reads like this: “The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, “What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?”

Moses answered him, “Because the people come to me to seek God’s will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God’s decrees and laws.”

Moses’ father-in-law replied, “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to

me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these will go home satisfied.

Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves. Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country.” This happened just before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

Our congregation is a little like the Israelites in the desert. In the past, when things have gone wrong for members, the congregation has looked to the pastor(s) to provide the needed guidance, support, and care for those hurting members. The problem with this picture is that caring for the number and needs of hurting people usually requires far more time than the time the pastor(s) have available. The result is that people receive less care and support than they need. They may feel lonely, neglected; they may think no one really cares.

The pastors who have provided care for hurting members have also seen the inadequacy of this model. A pastor might visit a newly

bereaved widow or widower for a number of weeks, but soon other people need that pastor's attention as well. So as new crises arise that demand the leaders' attention, they turn their care to others, leaving some members still hurting and still in need of care.

Stephen Ministry provides a solution for this problem, just as Jethro offers a solution for Moses' difficulties in trying to do everything himself. By training gifted individuals to help with the caring, Stephen Ministry multiplies the amount of caring that can be accomplished and helps individual care receivers experience the support and concern they need for as long as they need it. One person cannot do it alone.

In the 6th chapter of Acts, the young Christian church has been growing so fast that some members weren't getting the care they needed. They faced the same problems all institutions meet as they expand. The apostles find themselves harried by the task of delivering food to the needy. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn the responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." Do you know what happened? These seven used the different gifts God had equipped them for, and the church grew; in fact, it multiplied. One of those seven known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom was named Stephen. Our Stephen Ministry program is named for him, one with the gift to care for others. We have discovered the blessings of mobilizing more people for ministry. Our Stephen Ministers use their gifts from God, and sound biblical and psychological and counseling disciplines, to provide the best care possible for those who are hurting.

Our congregation's consistent intention is to allow and encourage people to serve with their gifts. It is God's grace and also basic wisdom that laypeople don't just add a little to the clergy's ministry. They multiply the congregation's ministry. Our Stephen Ministers multiply our ministry—Christ reaches through them to others, and through those others their care continues and multiplies. Our Stephen Ministers are set aside for God, trained to care on a one-to-one basis, and the joy that motivates them is based on serving Christ with their best gifts. Their service is a great joy to their care receivers and to their pastor. Most Stephen Ministers I've talked to say that they get more out of their caring relationships than they put into them.

Our mission here at American Lutheran is "To proclaim the love of Jesus Christ, invite others to participate in our faith community, and be a blessing to all in word and deed." We are led by the biblical message of God's gifts for ministry to every Christian. We are all ministers, each with our own specialty, as we have been gifted. Each minister is not only gifted, but also given as a gift to others, sent to love and care for others in Christ's name. Our Stephen Ministers are perfect examples of God's grace among us. They are as much a gift from God to our congregation and community as were those capable, honest, God-fearing men that God granted to the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai, and as much as those seven including Stephen, full of the Spirit and wisdom, that God gave to the early Christians in Jerusalem.

Informed by Moses and Jethro and Stephen, and following God's Holy Spirit, our Stephen Ministers quietly and confidentially get things done here for God. Glory to God!

Earlier this year, Pastor Judith, Sharron Schueman, and I completed the Stephen Ministry Bridge Leader's training course via Zoom. It is designed to provide spiritual growth and help our

Stephen leaders implement our vision for a caring community that reaches its full potential. The costs to do so were covered by a generous grant from Pastor Erv Langholtz's family. Our sincere thanks to them for their generosity. They realize how important Stephen Ministry was to Erv, and how hard he worked to implement the program here at ALC.

The church is Christ's very body here on earth, his spirit living again through us. God's purpose for us is that we live our lives as our Lord Jesus Christ lived. Living that way is not a conventional, moderate, respectable life. Jesus lived all out for God and for others. Paul the apostle, in addressing the Ephesian Christians, explained the function of the church. He proclaimed that God has endowed us with divine gifts for the sake of Christ's living body on earth—the church—and for the good of humanity. Paul announces the good news that God does not lurk behind heaven's fence, shouting orders to earth: "Do this! Do that!" God comes to us and bends down like an adult to a child saying, "I want to give you true Life." Christ's gift to us is his loving Spirit, which permeates the church and the world—through us. Our Stephen Ministers are constantly undergirded by the deep knowledge of how God cherishes each one of us. They care for others from this same basic belief. They recognize God's image, the trace of God in every person.

Often, our care receivers experience themselves and their lives as scattered and confused. God unifies the church and every individual within it. Our Stephen Ministers help people bring their lives back together. Care receivers find order in lives where chaos had reigned. They experience the centering, the reunification, the integration of their faith and personality.

Christians are people who do something. We don't just show up on Sunday to grab a little blessing that gets us through the week. We are people to whom God gives everything—and then asks everything

of us. God has already graced each of us so that we can make our own distinctive contributions. None of us has everything the church needs. Our pastors encourage God's children to discover, develop, and exercise the gifts God has given for this congregation's ministry—the ministry that starts in this congregation, but that certainly doesn't end here.

Listen to this text from the 4th chapter of Ephesians: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ”

The church as Ephesus grew from being a sleepy little haven for the respectably religious into a community that held worship services all Sunday long just to fit in all the people who were attracted by the Spirit of Christ and to a faith worth living. The week at St. Paul's was filled with groups of people who came to worship, who came to learn, who supported one another, and who then reached out to their community in dozens of organized and individual ways. They practiced what Paul wrote: that every Christian has the gifts, bestowed by the Spirit, to do something important for Christ through the church. In their congregation, the pastor taught and trained the laity to do the work of Jesus Christ.

Our congregation is like the little Christian congregation in Ephesus back in the first century A.D. We are a gathering of many different kinds of people from various backgrounds, held together now by God's grace in Christ. We are an outpost of Christianity surrounded by a world that needs our Christian faithfulness. We have each been gifted by God and dedicated by God for great works of ministry. This congregation is rich with gifted Christians who are

filled with Christ's Spirit and whose deepest satisfactions come in serving with their God-given gifts.

Some of you gifted Christians will become Stephen Ministers. Our Stephen Leaders are ready to equip you. The Stephen Leaders have read, studied, prayed, and worked hard to prepare for their ministry. The Stephen Ministers whom they train will have an extremely satisfying ministry ahead of them, not only because it serves Christ and others, but because it is what God has called them to be, and gifted them to do.

Our new Stephen Ministers will be trained, commissioned, and assigned, and then provide care for people while God provides the cure for them. They will take their place alongside other dedicated Christians that have serving our faith community for decades. Hundreds, if not thousands will be served.

How can you support this ministry? You can become a Stephen Minister and join this noble cause. You can pray for our Stephen Ministers. You can refer people to them, or simply tell others that we have trained, disciplined Christian friends here who follow Christ by caring for others. You might follow the lead of the Langholtz family by offering memorials so that we can expand these ministries here and to other congregations within our geographical area.

Needy people will continue to come to our Stephen Ministers, just as Jesus promised that they would come to him: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). If we asked those hundreds of people who have been helped, loved, and supported by our Stephen Ministers-- "If American Lutheran were to disappear tomorrow, would anyone miss it?" they'll say, "Yes, Oh my, Yes!

Let us thank Christ for the ministry that has been among us, and let us look hopefully and thankfully to the future blessings that he shall most certainly bring to others through our service: Please pray with me.

Our loving God and heavenly Father, our Lord Jesus has come among us to show your love by including us in your family. Help us by your Spirit to obey him joyfully, and reflect the resemblance to our heavenly family, as did our Lord Jesus Christ. Among the many gifts you have given your church are people called to equip us for service. Thank you for these precious servants. Use them to teach us, inspire us, and make us fit for the ministries you have given us to perform, serving according to the gifts you have given us, and glorifying you by caring for others. Continue to work in us, moving us toward wholeness and maturity until we resemble our Lord Jesus.

You have blessed our congregation and our community with the gift of Stephen Ministry. We have seen our caregiving grow and prosper under your gentle guidance. Many people have been touched by the care of our Stephen Ministers. We ask for your continued blessing on our efforts, and we offer ourselves always to your service here on earth. Help us to know the needs of those who hunger for your healing touch. We ask this in Jesus' holy name. Amen and Amen.