

“The Lord makes us rest, restores our souls,
and leads us to right paths.” AMEN!

The rabbi and student traveled into a village
to seek shelter for the night
from one of the village’s elders.

The first one they encountered raised his voice in anger
at the request from the travelers.

The student was furious at the elder’s
lack of hospitality and grumbled, but the rabbi
calmly turned and left.

Not long after that encounter the angry man
who lacked hospitality caught up
to the rabbi and student.

He begged forgiveness saying he’d
just received terrible news
that his wife was gravely ill.

He spoke truthfully, that her suffering
found its voice in his anger.

The teacher replied gently,
putting a hand on his shoulder,
“Now that the anger is seen, it can now
transform itself into compassion for

both yourself and your wife.”

Later, the rabbi asked the student what she'd seen in the exchange with the elder.

Her answer, “I saw the truth that we do not know what sorts or tragedies others are going through.

The elder judged us with anger without knowing why at first, and I judged him with anger because my expectations weren't met.” (Pause)

This story teaches us an important lesson of what it means to do life together.

It reminds us of the things we do not know in the people around us that trouble them or worse, torment them. (Pause)

Today, I'm drawn to the lesson from the Book of Acts that speaks of powerful, life-changing, community affirming actions of spiritual transformation.

A Jesus-following community that devoted itself to the apostolic teaching and the fellowship which included the breaking of bread and prayer.

The powerfully affirming actions of

breaking bread and prayer are affirmed quickly,
since that's a large part of what we do together.

But the parts that are harder to
understand (or accomplish) are the
amazing witnesses of the redistribution of assets

among the community where everyone
shared in ways that left not one person in need.

Everyone shared something with
glad and generous hearts.

It's so fairy tale like, don't you think, as
we dream of such an egalitarian concept ever
being really possible in
the context of N. American culture.

It does appear impossibly extreme,
not only in our personal lives, but also
in congregation life.

Where expansion is sought over and above
everything else in many churches.

And it's hardly taught that a church that takes
care of its own is following a mark of
important discipleship witnessed in Acts.

And though we are far from perfect,
I do see the wondrous things St. Stephen does

that hold us together.

Whether in prayer, financial assistance, or in
reaching out to walk with someone
needing companionship,
St. Stephen takes care of her own.

No matter how long you've been connected to
this church you are probably able to tell a story
about something God has done in this
community to keep it together.

Six years ago, this congregation,
along with many others, struggled to survive in
the midst of a pandemic.

When we had something like six people in worship
and were thrust into live-streaming the service with all
the trials and errors.

It was an amazing miracle that we were able
to get through that.

If you've been here a long time then you
might remember when this congregation
went through the process and work
to become a Reconciling in Christ
congregation.

The first in Florida to openly welcome people
no matter who they loved.

That took a lot of work and difficult conversations
that was too much for some people, and
some left.

I've heard stories of trial that occurred here
between pastors and some occasions of
lengthy pastoral interims coming to
St. Stephen while the church sought
for the pastor with the best fit
to the congregation.

These are just a few big examples, but there are
hundreds of smaller, though not less important,
examples of people holding
this congregation together.

Togetherness and mutual aid is
this community's foundation. (Pause)

As Jesus taught in John's gospel about
the Good Shepherd being the gate that offers
both protection and freedom to the sheep.

Whoever enters will be saved to come and go
and find pasture.

And as a community of faith that follows Jesus,
we are called to take up the role of the shepherd.

To be a church that protects and to liberates.

Allowing people to come and go as the Spirit directs.

To proclaim that abundant life comes to those
who take time to understand what
others are going through,

without quick judgment or autonomic anger
without seeking to understand. (Pause)

People of God, I know you see the ways
that abundant life is being prevented in our nation.

May we counter that fear with
gratitude and compassion together.

Gratitude that changes perspectives that do
not deny suffering, but to actually see
the ways people help people.

Compassion that is cultivated in our
relationships with others,
even those not like us.

For once I was lost, but now found.

The person we are quick to be angry at,
or the family member we dread to
sit down with for a meal,

may be going through something traumatic

we don't know about.

AMEN!