

When Life Is the Pits, Who Cares?

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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Galatians 6:1-3 (NRSV)

Do we have any roller coaster fans in the house? Sandy's sister and her family plan all of their vacations around theme parks with awesome roller coasters. Even when they visit family, they make a point of visiting the nearest park and riding the largest coasters there several times. If you are a coaster fan, you know how it goes: You are secured in the vehicle that climbs ever so slowly until it reaches a point at which it pauses seemingly before it makes its screaming descent into what seems like certain destruction, only to bottom out just in time to challenge the next incline. Modern rides like the Hollywood Rip Ride Rockit in Orlando also turn you upside down in the process. There are no less than 10 such rides in the Orlando, FL area alone, so they obviously appeal to more than just my sister-in-law and her family. We scream, swallow our stomachs, have our whole life flash before us, and then get on and do it all over again.

Life is like these roller coasters in many ways. Many of the circumstances are beyond our control. We have made decisions that have locked us into a set of circumstances; and, while some of it is fun and thrilling, we are not always prepared for the plunges that are a part of the ride. Maybe we are on a coaster for the first time. We know it has dramatic ups and downs, but we have never experienced them before. When we do, it is a bit overwhelming, and we wish we could get off, but we have to stay for the duration of the ride. Life is what happens when you are making other plans. Every day, we encounter experiences and situations that we do not anticipate and perhaps have not prepared for. In life, bottoms fall out ... people fall down ... lives fall apart ... fortunes plunge ... futures crash. One minute we are climbing. The next minute we are poised at the top. And the minute after that, we find ourselves toppled by something that sucks the breath right out of us.

Somebody dies, and the bottom falls out. Somebody leaves, and the bottom falls out. Somebody calls with a word about a suspicious mass ... a suspicious white powder ... a suspicious curl of smoke ... a suspicious meeting of upper management ... a suspicious trend in the market ... and the bottom falls out. Later today, take a piece of paper and write down the five most devastating pieces of news you have ever received. Then you will understand what I'm talking about.

But sometimes it is not just "news" that sends us spiraling downward. We also contribute to our descent. We "sink" into depression. We "fall" from favor. We "drop out" of school. There are countless ways to fall. And most of us have tried one or two. Isn't it interesting that we speak of being "down in the dumps" or "in the pits" ... a pair of euphemisms that reveal far more than we intend them to. We even talk about people who have turned the corner as having "bottomed out."

The Bible is not silent on such tumbles and descents. Indeed, scripture focuses on the word "fall." In sin, we are said to have "fallen from grace." And anyone's house (or anyone's life) which is not grounded on the rock of God's word, will be blown down ... "and great will be the fall of it." We're talking serious downward spirals here.

When we go through such an experience, we tend to become quite theological about it. We say, "This feels like hell," or "This hurts like hell." Which is, quite literally, what we mean. For while we may not know much about hell, we know that if there is such a place ... such a state ... such a condition ... this must be pretty much what it feels like, given that this feeling is as far from being "heavenly" as any we have ever experienced. (Isn't it interesting that people who do not demonstrate a lot of faith in their lives tend to use the word "hell" a lot? That might mean something!)

And since it feels like hell ... whether or not it is ... it also feels like we are very far removed from God. For what is hell, if not the feeling of separation from God? Which is why most of us feel abandoned and left hanging out to dry when the bottom falls out.

But the purpose of our conversation today is to help us think about what do next when bad things happen: "What do you do when the bottom falls out?"

I suppose the first thing we do is "look up." I mean, when we've fallen to rock bottom, what else is there? Carl Rogers once suggested that human beings are like potatoes in a Michigan cellar. So long as there's a glimmer of light from above, they will develop sprouts and reach for it. We traditionally used the words "look up" as a means of saying "get in touch with God" ... or "pray"? Don't the AA people continually stress the need to relate to one's Higher Power? All of which would tend to suggest: "When the bottom falls out, pray." There may not be instant responses, but continue in prayer – even for months if necessary. Help will come.

This leads us to a second response to the bottom falling out. It is what Barry Johnson (in his book, *Choosing Hope*), calls the "action option." Do something. We cope with prayer. But we conquer with action. We are people of faith in community for a reason. God never intended us to suffer in silence or endure in isolation. Scripture tells us to bear one another's burdens. Many times you see markings on large crates in Lowe's and Home Depot these days that say "Team Lift." Those items are generally too heavy to be handled safely by one person, so anyone who is approaching is cautioned to get help with that load.

That's what I encourage you to do today. We assemble as the Body of Christ – the Church – to worship and learn, but we also enter into relationships that enable us to help one another during the tough times. Now some of you may be sitting there wondering, "What can I do?" Others already know. When others are experiencing problems, they first need to tell someone. So we need to be **good listeners**. Now, 21st Century people don't do that well. We absorb sound bites - a very small percentage of what we hear, so it is a sacrifice to really listen. But it is the **loving** thing to do. (John 15:12). That takes **patience** to listen until the person in need feels comfortable sharing with you. They must **trust** that you will take them seriously and that you will **love** them **unconditionally** regardless of what they have to tell you. Inherent in that trust is **confidentiality** – you will be sure to preserve the **relationship** by keeping the information to yourself until the person who came to you wants to share it with another.

Some of you are out there saying to yourselves, "That's what you and the other pastors are here for, Jim!" And you are correct. Since Pastoral Care is a primary part of my job, I am acutely aware that there are needs that should be met and conversations that we should have. I am also here to confess to you that we don't always succeed in having those conversations in a timely way. Sometimes, we don't know about the need. Sometimes there just isn't enough of us to go around. I wish I could announce to you that all my time will be spent on Pastoral Care going forward, but that is not the case. The pastors cannot meet adequately the care needs of the hundreds of people in this congregation. That's why we have a day like today when we can call on the Priesthood of All Believers – YOU – **the ministers** (We are 'pastors', but all of us are 'ministers.') of the church to be sensitive to the circumstances of those you relate to and help them bear their burden whatever it is. Know that there are times when they need to call us for counseling and possible referral to professional counseling. Those referrals always will be Christ-centered resources.

Here at East Cobb UMC, we are privileged to have another option – a group of dedicated and equipped individuals who are here to walk beside you in your time of need, listen to your pain, and help you as you find ways to deal with that pain. They are your **Stephen Ministers**, and many of them are in the service today. They are always available to pray with you, and when you have a difficult, ongoing situation, they are available to enter into a formal relationship with you to meet with you on a weekly basis for as long as you need them. All of these people have had 50 hours of training and have made a two year commitment to the Stephen Ministry program. Jackie Short and Jody Kershner are our Stephen Leaders. Brian and I also are trained Stephen Leaders. So you have a valuable resource here – not to replace counseling or caring relationships among friends in the congregation, but to provide that degree of added care that only they are equipped to provide. These wonderful and dedicated volunteers are supervised in sessions twice monthly; however, the identity of the care receiver – you – is never revealed to the group. **Confidentiality in providing uniquely Christ-centered caring is the centerpiece of this ministry.** Many of you have been

beneficiaries of this program, but I will not ask you to identify yourself. Your participation remains confidential and always will unless you choose to reveal it. We have a testimony today from one of our members who was a recent **Care Receiver** which I have been given permission to share.

Last spring I was going through a particularly rough time in my life. I was slowly losing my Mom to Alzheimer disease. I felt that I was slipping away too. This should have been a happy time for me as our youngest son and daughter-in-law were expecting their first child, our 9th grandchild. But, the first thing on my mind each morning and the last thing each night was my Mom and how sad I was that she didn't know her family anymore. It was so hard to go see her in the nursing home looking like someone else and not my beautiful Mom. It was also heartbreaking for me that she didn't know who I was.

I felt like my family and friends were tired of hearing me talk about Mom all the time. I was consumed by it. I realized I needed someone else to talk to so that I could say things that I couldn't say to my family. I knew I wanted that someone to be a Christian.

I spoke to Jim Perry about the Stephen Ministry. He felt that a Stephen Minister was just what I needed and said he would set me up with one and have her get in touch with me. I learned that a Stephen Minister is always the same gender as the person receiving the ministry and that the recipient is not to reveal who their Stephen Minister is to other people.

We met on a regular basis for 9 or 10 months. Many times when I got there for our meeting I was extremely tired and stressed out. She would just let me talk, cry, laugh whatever I needed. She allowed me to reminisce about my Mom and ramble if I needed to. She didn't try to give me advice. She gave me care, comfort and a sounding board, which was what I needed. She was truly interested and wanted to know about my large family and how each one was related to me; sons, daughters, grandchildren, sister, brother, niece, nephew, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, etc. She could tell how important my family is to me. We always ended our time together by holding hands and she would pray. It became a very special relationship.

My Mom died in August last year and my Stephen Minister was there for me. Because of our relationship prior to my Mom dying I was able to handle her death and not fall apart when the time came.

I would recommend to anyone going through a rough patch in their life, whatever that may be, to seek out a Stephen Minister and to meet with them regularly. He or she will tell you when they think you don't really need them anymore and have made it through that tough time. Mine did. We came to the conclusion this January that I was okay and could finally let my Mom go.

Who cares? **Jesus cares.** There is a song by Graeff and Hall that has been around for a while called "Does Jesus Care?" After going through a lot of life circumstances that we could call "the pits," the refrain answers the question:

Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares,
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long night dreary,
I know my Savior cares.

But, Jim, you have been talking about how we can and should care for one another. Don't we already know that Jesus cares? Most of us do, but do you know how he cares? The Spirit of Christ, the living God, lives in us, so we become the instruments of **healing** and **wholeness** in the lives of others. Our **love, patience, and compassion** is the love, patience, and compassion of Christ being extended through us to help sustain others in their time of need. We are privileged to be the instruments of God's **presence** whether we are pastors, caring members, or Stephen Ministers. When we do not reach out in love to the needs and burdens of those around us, we are effectively withholding the care that is needed to get through a difficult time.

There is a brochure in your bulletin today that explains in some detail what Stephen Ministry is and how it works. Please take that with you and familiarize yourself with it. Maybe you do not need the ministry now. Thank God for that, but you likely know someone who does. Begin to minister today by becoming more open and available to the needs of others. Don't feel that there is nothing you can do because you do not have special skills. In caring for others, it is more important to be **available** than able. A silent presence often says more than any words you could convey.

As you reach out in **loving care** and **concern** to others, you may find that you want to do more. The Pastoral Staff and the Stephen Ministry need your help in several ways:

- Let us know when you become aware of a concern or need that we might not be aware of in the Church Office. Remember, we would prefer to get many calls than not know of a concern.
- Be sure your classes and other small groups are following up with those who are out to see why.
- Routinely send the concerns identified by your groups to us in the Church Office. (jim@eastcobbumc.org).
- Encourage those you know who are having ongoing difficulties to talk to us about the possibility of being assigned a Stephen Minister.
- Pray fervently for your Pastoral Staff and your Stephen Ministers.
- Pray for God's guidance for you. Is God calling you to be a Stephen Minister? Talk to us if you are feeling led in that direction. We always need additional effective Stephen Ministers, and we can help you begin that journey.

There is a fascinating legend in Judaism that when the Children of Israel were being chased by the Egyptians and had nowhere to go, the great waters parted only when the first Israelite stepped into the sea. If the sea of uncertainty is overwhelming you, do something about it today. No matter how desperate things seem to be, they can improve if we lovingly and compassionately move to bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the Law of Christ.

Prayer

Jody Kershner has been serving you with distinction as one of your Stephen Leaders for some time now. She was commissioned by the national Stephen Ministry organization at the conclusion of her training. But she is serving you in this community of faith, so today we are commissioning Jody as a Stephen Leader at East Cobb UMC.

Commissioning of Jody Kershner as Stephen Leader.