

*To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; <sup>3</sup> not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:1-4)*

### **This is How Christ Shepherds You**

All this week, as I was making visits, I read Jesus' words, "I am the good shepherd" to the people I visited. You know what? Every Christian I saw this week already knew and loved that picture of Jesus. That impresses me because we don't keep sheep. When Jesus said those words, he was talking to a people that saw sheep every day. Talking about sheep to them was as familiar as talking about traffic or television is to us, so it was natural for Jesus to go there. But the closest we ever get to sheep is when we take our kids to petting zoos or buy lamb at the grocery store. Yet, this picture of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, reaches across the centuries and moves our hearts today.

I think that's because we understand why sheep need a shepherd. We've all heard how defenseless sheep are. We know they get lost and die unless they're taken care of. We all understand that we are the dumb, helpless, defenseless sheep and Jesus is the good shepherd who takes care of us. So on the fourth Sunday after Easter, "Good Shepherd Sunday," the readings usually focus on that picture. But today, two of the readings take us in a different direction. Instead of the Good Shepherd, they speak of human shepherds taking care of God's flock. Is that a departure from the gospel lesson? In reality, no. Rather, it focuses on real life. On a practical level, **this is how Christ shepherds you.**

#### **I.**

We don't get to see Jesus taking care of us right now. He is, both spiritually and physically. But Jesus hides himself behind other things. He hides behind your job, your education, your doctors, and more to make sure that you have what you need for your body and life. And spiritually, he hides behind the gospel in the word and sacraments. He makes human speech, and water, and bread and wine into tools to care for your soul. And he hides behind the ministry. **This is how Christ shepherds you. He calls shepherds to care for you.**

Peter says, "**To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care.**" When I saw that this was my sermon text for today, my first thought was, "How am I going to preach on that? It would be a great text for a pastors conference, but what am I going to say to my members?" Well, as I thought about it, I remembered that this is just part of a letter that Peter wrote not to pastors, but to congregations. Originally, when a congregation got this letter, the whole thing was probably read out loud to the whole congregation. In chapter 5, Peter does address the pastors of those congregations. But he didn't tell them to send the members home when they got to this part. He wanted the members to hear this, too.

Why? Peter's instructions to ministers are really for your benefit. He's not giving practical advice for career advancement. He's telling them what God sent them to do for his people. They aren't CEO's. They aren't professionals trying to uphold some standard that generates respect in our world. They are shepherds sent to care for the people of God. All that God calls me to do, all that God calls our teachers to do, all that God ever calls any minister of the gospel to do is for your benefit. He shepherds you through us so that you will reach eternal life.

How does he get us shepherds where we belong to do that work? In the Acts passage for today, St. Paul told the ministers in Ephesus to shepherd God's flock. Do you know how they got their calls? St. Paul appointed them. But he says that God made them overseers. The elders or pastors that St. Peter was talking to may have been appointed by an apostle or a missionary. They may have been elected by the congregation. The truth is, we don't know much about their process. But they were called through the Church. The Holy Spirit worked behind the scenes and God gave his flock the ministers he wanted them to have.

It is no different today. God sees you. He sees all that makes your life difficult. He sees the illnesses and the financial cares and the stress of work. He sees the sin in your heart that weakens and distracts your

faith. He sees the temptations of the devil. He sees the obstacles that this world throws up that seem to make it impossible to live for God. He sees you, his sheep, at the mercy of the wolves. And he loves you. So he sends you pastors and teachers who carry his word to you. Through that word, he works. He cares for you every step of the way here and he brings you home to heaven.

## II.

Do you know what the word *pastor* literally means? Shepherd. Now, in our readings for today, God is using it to describe all ministers, not just pastors. God has been using the image of a shepherd's care for his flock to describe the ministry since Old Testament times. Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. No human pastor or shepherd can compare to that. We don't lay down our lives to save you. But God does use that same image for us human shepherds to emphasize the care that shepherds provide. Caring for someone always does involve sacrifice. How many of you moms come home from work and you just want to sit down for a while, but instead you get up and make dinner? How much time and effort and money have you parents sacrificed for your children? In the same way, God calls pastors and teachers to sacrifice for the people of God. In a much smaller way, he does call us to lay down our lives – to dedicate our lives – to serving God by serving you. **This is how Christ shepherds you. He calls shepherds to serve you.**

Peter spells out the kinds of things that a minister of the gospel is sent to do. He says, **“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.”** God calls all ministers to shepherd. Whether you're a parish pastor or a Lutheran elementary school teacher or a Lutheran high school teacher, there is one ministry of the gospel. God calls us all to care for the flock. Day by day, week by week, that care comes from preaching and from teaching in the classroom. It comes from personal conversations, both short and long. It comes from all the normal ways we try to take you deeper into God's word so that your faith grows when nothing crazy is going on. And it comes when hard times come. Those conversations in the hospital and the funeral home, those moments when you just need to know your Savior is listening and you need to hear how his promises apply in your crisis today. That's shepherding. Our teachers do it primarily with children. Pastors have a wider scope. But it's all spiritual care for the flock.

Notice, I did say care, not cure. I can't cure the hurt in your heart. I can't change a hardened heart and make it a heart of faith. Only God can cure. But he does that through the law and the gospel. He calls pastors and teachers to apply the word of life to you and he does the curing. He calls us to do that willingly. If you don't have a desire to serve God, you don't belong in the ministry. That willingness is a gift of faith. God works in our hearts through the good news and he awakens a joy and a willingness to serve. Without it, no amount of law can drive us to sacrifice for God's people. God re-awakens that gift of faith in the hearts of pastors and teachers day in and day out, because he loves you.

Peter tells us to be **“not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”** Because he loves you, Jesus tells us to have the attitude he had. Jesus didn't care about money. He cared about the people he came to die for. While he is our lord and master, he knelt all the way down to the cross for us. He calls us pastors and teachers to have that attitude. Sadly, some of you may have had experience with pastors and teachers who are arrogant or self-serving. But God calls us to trust him to take care of our physical needs and to serve. Where does an attitude like that come from? Looking forward to that day when the Chief Shepherd will appear and give us a crown of glory that will never fade away. To be faithful in the ministry, you have to be focused on heaven. If I'm focused on that, then I can focus you on that and be faithful.

God calls us to be like Christ. Who can do that? I can't. Every time I preach on the ministry, I see how sinful I am. I fear the damage I may do to the people of God. Every day, I have to ask God to forgive me for all the times that I cared about money and standard of living, for all the times I lorded it over the flock instead of giving them a good example of a Christian life and attitude, for all the times I was lazy and unwilling to sacrifice to shepherd. All that is sin and I deserve God's punishment in hell. But Christ came for me. He died for my failures as a pastor. He has forgiven me and he works in my heart through that message. I pray that every time I hear that good news, he would grow in my heart the gifts I need to serve you. I pray that he would use that forgiveness to make me a better shepherd. I pray he would do the same for all the workers he has called to serve us here at Peace and at HVL. I'm certain they share my struggles. Jesus died and rose for them

and all their failures and sins in the ministry. I hope that they, too, hear that good news and understand it applies to them.

And I hope and pray that God's people rejoice in the way that God works in the ministry. It is his gift to you. We are his gift to you. That sounds egotistical, doesn't it? Except that I can't help but believe you could do better than me. I bet our teachers would all say the same. But God calls shepherds, pastors and teachers, for the good of his flock. Although he hides behind call meetings and district officials and votes, the Holy Spirit works through the church. God carefully chooses the men and women that he sends to you. We are taught to regard the place where we serve as the most beautiful spot on earth, second only to the Garden of Eden, because this is where God called us to serve. It takes faith for us to see that, because every call is in this sinful, painful world. The flip side is true for you. God calls you to trust that the pastors and teachers he gives you as the best possible fit you could have today because God gave them to you.

Can you do that? Sometimes, it's hard. Sometimes, you see our sin and our weakness and the limitations of our gifts and you just wish someone else were here. You may even decide to go somewhere else because you're tired of hearing my voice 52 weeks a year. I won't deny the sin or the weakness or the lack of gifts. But God called us. He calls you to trust him and accept us as his gifts, even as he has Peter write to us and urge us to strive continuously to faithfully shepherd God's flock. He calls you to remember that you come here for the message, not the man – as long as he is faithfully proclaiming it. And it is sin to disrespect God by disrespecting the workers he sends. Are you guilty of that sin?

Aren't we all sometimes? I've heard plenty of commentary from members when they were unhappy with their pastors and teachers. I myself have chafed at professors and synod officials that I thought were not doing the job as I wanted them to do it. It is so easy for us to judge the workers God sends and in the process to condemn Jesus for the way he is shepherding his church. When we do that, we sin and we deserve his punishment in hell forever.

But the good news that God sent me here to proclaim to you is that Jesus died and paid for that sin, too. It's all washed away in his blood. Jesus lived as the only perfect member of God's church on earth. He loved and supported and encouraged God's servants the way no other human being ever could. Today, God sees Jesus doing that when he looks at you. He calls you holy. Jesus rose and God promises you that all your sin is gone forever – even the sin of disrespecting God by disrespecting his workers. You are forgiven and you will live with him forever. Hearing that good news, after confronting the reality of our sin – that's what shepherding is all about. That's what Jesus did over and over again. That's what he calls all pastors and teachers to spend themselves in doing. My friends, this is how Christ shepherds you, through that message, taught and proclaimed and shared in countless ways and unnumbered situations while you pass through this barren wilderness to eternal life. May God grant you shepherds who proclaim that message faithfully and truly care for you, his flock. May Jesus bless their ministry among you. May you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the Good News that your workers proclaim to you. Amen.