

Pentecost 19, October 8, 2023— Good Shepherd, Beaver Dam — *I Am a Church Member* —

The Church's Responsibility: Personal Care

¹¹ For this is what the LORD God says. Here I am. I myself will seek the welfare of my flock and carefully search for them. ¹² As a shepherd searches for his flock when his sheep that were with him have been scattered, so I will search for my flock and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own soil. I will shepherd them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys, and in all the settlements of the land. ¹⁴ I will lead them into good pasture, and their grazing land will be on the high mountains of Israel. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and they will pasture on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will shepherd my flock. I myself will let them lie down, declares the LORD God. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured. I will strengthen the weak. I will destroy the fat and the strong, and I will shepherd them with justice.

¹⁷ What about you, my flock? This is what the LORD God says. I am going to judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats. ¹⁸ Isn't it enough for you that you feed on the good pasture? Must you trample the rest of your pastures with your feet? Isn't it enough that you drink the clear water? Must you muddy the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ Then my flock has to feed on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied. ²⁰ Therefore, this is what the LORD God says to them. I myself am going to judge between the fat sheep and the thin sheep. ²¹ Because you have shoved them with your side and shoulder and butted all the weak ones with your horns, until you scattered them abroad, ²² I will save my flock so that they will not become plunder anymore. In this way I will judge between one sheep and another.

²³ Then I will raise up over them one shepherd, and he will tend them. My servant David will tend them, and he will be their shepherd. ²⁴ I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David will be the prince among them. I, the LORD, have spoken.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” 2 Corinthians 1:3

We continue today with the theme for the month — *“I Am a Church Member.”* While we will concentrate on today's Old Testament reading from Ezekiel, we do that in light of the other two readings. In the Epistle lesson Peter urged the elders, who were the spiritual leaders in the churches, to be shepherds of the people in their care. Sin complicates the relationship between Christ's undershepherds and the people they serve, but genuine love and care for each other can overcome that, so that all we do reflects the genuine love and care of Christ himself. This is the role that church leaders and especially pastors strive to follow in their desire to care very personally for the souls entrusted to their care.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus reinstates Peter as a disciple. Three times Jesus asks him: “Do you love me?” Peter responds with a strong “yes”, spoken with conviction and a lesson learned by his three-time denial of Jesus in the house of the high priest. Jesus commissions Peter and all New Testament believers with “Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

Earlier Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd. Now through his words to Peter and Peter's words to his readers, we see that the Church and its leaders have a vital role to play in the spiritual care of the members of the Church. The Church is to care personally for its members. The Church, especially pastors and elders, can be described as the Good Shepherd's undershepherds. When this is properly done Christ's sheep can with confidence **Follow the Good Shepherd's Undershepherds.**

Now the prophet Ezekiel directed the Holy Spirit speaks about the role of the Good Shepherd, who is the model for Christ's undershepherds. Ezekiel's very challenging prophetic ministry had two phases. First he was God's spokesman in the years leading up to the Babylonia Captivity which began around 606 B.C. when Jerusalem and Judah were defeated. He had warned that captivity was coming but his message was rejected. At some point he was carried as a captive to Babylon. There his message was one that had glimmers of hope for the Children of Israel. Captivity, at least for a remnant, would end and some of the Israelites would return to the Promised Land.

In Chapter 34 we see some of that little glimmer of hope. Ezekiel was instructed to point out how the spiritual shepherds of the people had failed in their responsibility. Now in our text the Sovereign Lord says that he is going to take up that shepherding role himself. Here is none other than the description of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. As we connect the Epistle and Gospel lessons to these words, we see that this shepherding role has been given to the church, especially to the Church's spiritual leaders, such as elders and pastors.

We can pick out some words and phrases to help us understand that the church has a vital role in the welfare of the members of the church as it cares very personally for their spiritual well-being. In vs. 13 & 14 the Good Shepherd says: *¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own soil. I will shepherd them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys, and in all the settlements of the land. ¹⁴ I will lead them into good pasture, and their grazing land will be on the high mountains of Israel. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and they will pasture on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.* What is that "good pasture, the good grazing" to which the Church is to lead its people? It is the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. Don't these words bring to mind the 23rd Psalm? David wrote, *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.* (v.2). Here is the role of the church: personal care by bring God's Word to its people. The Word, along with Baptism and Lord's Supper enable Jesus' sheep to *"lie down."* Have you ever thought about how to make a sheep lie down? A sheep will only lie down when it is filled with contentment, when it has been nourished and watered and feels safe. The responsibility of the Church is to so nourish us with the peace of forgiveness through Jesus that we can contentedly "lie down." Though the world around us might be raging and earthly troubles surround us we can have peace in our hearts through the faithful ministry of the Church.

Here's why your pastor wants to know when you are sick or hospitalized. He wants to take Word and Sacrament to those who are unable to come to church. Here's why your congregation holds Sunday school and Bible classes on Sundays and during the week.

Let's look at the first two verses of our text: *¹¹ For this is what the LORD God says. Here I am. I myself will seek the welfare of my flock and carefully search for them. ¹² As a shepherd searches for his flock when his sheep that were with him have been scattered, so I will search for my flock and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.* Here as the Good Shepherd speaks about his role we also see the work of the Church. Verse 16 repeats the thought: *¹⁶ I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured. I will strengthen the weak. I will destroy the fat and the strong, and I will shepherd them with justice.* The church concerns itself with those who seem to be growing weak in their faith; those whose church attendance is slipping; those who have made earthly pursuits more important than spiritual ones. You can expect to be contacted by pastor and elders if they don't see you regularly here in church.

That's why Good Shepherd congregation's *"The Meaning and Blessing of Church Membership"* document has this statement: *"I will welcome evangelical admonition and correction when I have erred."* Through public preaching and private visits your pastor reminds you of your sinfulness and calls you to repentance. If repentance should be lacking you can expect the congregation to publically call you to repent through the loving steps which Jesus describes in Matthew 18. Jesus taught: *¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and*

show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector. ¹⁸ Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be^{ed} bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. The Church, filled with concern for the well-being of souls, fulfills its responsibility when it warns impenitent sinners that they are endangering their soul's salvation by their failure to repent. This is the loving, personal caring thing to do.

A portion of this chapter of Ezekiel is more familiar because it is sometimes used in the rotation of Sunday Scripture readings. But verses 17-22 usually are skipped. These verses have some harsh sounding actions of the Good Shepherd. Listen to them again: ¹⁷ "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet? ²⁰ "Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, ²² I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another.

Our loving and compassionate sovereign Lord will finally condemn the hardened, impenitent sinner to the unending torments of hell. That's not his desire, but that's shepherding his flock with justice. When the Church declares to the impenitent sinner that he is no longer a member of the congregation, the congregation is carrying out its Christ-given responsibility.

So from our Scripture readings this morning, we see the Christian congregation has a responsibility for caring personally for souls. When this is done according to God's Word we can with confidence **Follow the Good Shepherd's Undershepherds.** Amen

Joel Jaeger