

Shepherding God's Flock

Our second reading is 1 Peter 5:1-7. This year marks my 50th anniversary of ordained ministry, and since the lectionary calls for a passage on shepherding God's people, I want to share the essence of the sermon I gave to your Pastor Search Committee in 2014. That small but astute congregation of six or seven was as interested in whether or not I could preach a sermon within 15 minutes as in what I had to say! That marked a new beginning for me from Baptist to Presbyterian sermon length. I read from our text Peter's charge to his fellow elders, which has an application to all of us:

"Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. ³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. ⁵ In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for

*'God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.*

⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you."

As your teaching elder, I need to be reminded after 50 years of pastoral ministry, as I look at this faded certificate that I took off my study wall, of the challenge that I received at my ordination. This Scripture passage contains some heavy and challenging words for all of us—God's leaders as well as those who follow his leadership. To rightly serve as Christ's under-shepherds we must be *the right kind of leaders*.

Often, with possible exceptions such as young Timothy, these who were chosen were literally the older men in the churches, possibly the heads of the households where the congregations met for worship and fellowship. If age is a criterion, I'm highly qualified in that category, at least. Peter identified himself as a fellow elder, one entrusted with the care of the church. And he indicates that he and all the elders of the churches are primarily *followers of Jesus*.

As we know, Peter had failed to heed Jesus' warning that he would deny him. But following Peter's repentance, the risen Lord gave him, along with the other disciples, a commission to continue his gospel work (Jn. 20:19-23). Not only was Peter given that commission, but he received a special visit from the Lord, who reinstated him and particularly commissioned him to serve as an under-shepherd, helping take care of his sheep, following him all the way to his death (Jn. 21:15-19). Peter came to understand the cross was not to be avoided, but embraced as the pattern for his life (Matt. 16:22).

These elders were Kingdom-of-God people who had an entirely different way of seeing reality. As leaders of a suffering church, they saw and thought with the perspective of Christ (2 Cor. 2:16), and their lives were becoming cruciform, like that of their Lord. In the words of Henri Nouwen, they were now “wounded healers.” And I’ve come to see that I’m better equipped to minister to others, not because of theological knowledge or ministry experience, but because of suffering that has wounded me (2 Cor. 1:6; 1 Thess. 3:3).

The right kind of leaders are also *willing under-shepherds*. Jesus used the sheep and shepherd metaphor, describing himself as the Good Shepherd who had come to seek and to find the straying, and to lay down his life for us lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7; John 10:1-18). And, when reinstating Peter and reminding him of his three-fold denial, Jesus challenged him three times about his love for him and charged him to feed and care for his sheep (Jn. 21:15-17).

The word “pastor” is a translation of this verb in our text, “to shepherd.” Shepherding and caring for the church is a task shared by pastor/elder, elders, ministers and all servant leaders of the church.

Peter notes that the elders needed to serve, not because they must but because they are willing (2). Conditions of persecution likely caused some elder candidates to reluctantly accept the assignment (“grudgingly,” *NLT*). But God is pleased whenever his people are willing to serve him gladly, whatever the risks and the cost. For me, serving churches as pastor has been a privilege and usually a delight, even during some rather difficult times.

Peter notes that willing under-shepherds are not to be greedy for money, but eager to serve” (2). Financial greed among church leaders is evidently a problem that goes back all the way to the 1st Century. I also must be vigilant my financial need doesn’t cross over into financial greed.

God has placed us in Dale Heights Church, a local fold of God’s sheep, to serve in *caring for the flock*. Peter challenges the elders to join him in the tasks involved in shepherding God’s flock under their care as overseers (2), the tasks of protecting, leading and guiding the sheep. We thereby join Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in rescuing lost sheep that are without a shepherd (Lk. 15:3-7).

The Apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian elders of their responsibility to “keep watch” as overseers and under-shepherds, and protect the church from “savage wolves” that would invade and destroy the flock of God’s sheep (Acts 20:28f). In the same way, as God’s under shepherds and overseers of his people, we’re to provide solid teaching that will help to strengthen his people as they face a bewildering world. As the risen Lord

charged Peter to express his love by feeding his sheep (Jn. 21:15ff), I realize this is my responsibility as well, to faithfully teach and proclaim God's word.

We're to care for God's people by leading and guiding, not only by teaching and preaching, but also by providing a worthy example for his people to follow. One sin we as church leaders, and particularly as the preaching pastors must avoid, is what Calvin called "the sin of the Pharisees" (314). Jesus denounced the teachers of the law who failed to practice what they preached, and who loaded the people down with the burden of laws and requirements that they themselves were unwilling to obey and to fulfill (Matt. 23:1-4).

All of this is to say that we as ministers and elders are not to lead in an autocratic, power-wielding way but rather as *under the Chief Shepherd*. Ours is a sacred trust, to be his servant leaders. We're given authority to lead, but ours is a God-given and God-shaped authority. We're to lead with gentleness and love, even as did Jesus, instead of lording it over those in our charge (3).

We're called to be under-shepherds not cattle drivers. A cattle driver walks behind his herd with a stick, but a shepherd walks ahead of his flock and his sheep will follow him.

We're those who're serving under the Lordship of Christ, as his representatives, and are to seek to be great in *service* and not in *power over* people (Lk. 22:24-30). Greg Boyd calls for the church to practice *power under*, which is leading and serving with the suffering love of Jesus rather than seeking church or political power and influence.

Citing Jesus' words about whoever would be great must become a servant (Mk. 10:43), Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service. Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out." He then decries the autocratic "personality cults" of "false authority," saying "The Church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren." Bonhoeffer then rightly notes that "The Church will place its confidence only in the simple servant of the Word of Jesus Christ because it knows that then it will be guided, not according to human wisdom and human conceit, but by the Word of the Good Shepherd."

Peter admonishes the elders to resist temptations for immediate gratification and financial advantage, and instead to seek the heavenly reward. This unfading crown of glory (4) is the "maranth" flower, a blossom of brilliant red that was used in the wreath of leaves worn by the winners of athletic games. What the Chief Shepherd gives to his faithful servants will never fade or be lost, and will make all our service and sacrifice during this brief pilgrimage well worth it.

Shepherding God's flock involves also *the right kind of followers*. Although there's the possibility that Peter is speaking to a group of younger people who were serving as apprentices to the elders, it is also likely that those "who are younger," (5) in principle includes all who are not elders. Those who are not called to be elders are called to be followers. "Follower" is not a demeaning label. In every congregation I've served, I've had my spiritual and intellectual superiors, but who also were supportive followers. In order to effectively shepherd God's flock and to lead the church, there must also be the right kind of followers, who *accept authority*.

As it should be, it's always awkward for me to proclaim my authority as a pastor/elder, and I'm quick to add that spiritual authority does not reside within a special position of privilege and power over others. Rather, the authority of the pastor and all the elders and overseers is in a God-given position of servant leadership. We do not rule as power-wielding dictators but serve as loving, caring under-shepherds who desire God's best for his people and God's mission to be accomplished through his church.

The right kind of leadership authority inspires love, respect and trust among the congregation and enables the people of God to "accept the authority of the elders" (*NLT*, 5). As Bonhoeffer says again,

"The question of trust, which is so closely related to that of authority, is determined by the faithfulness with which a (person) serves Jesus Christ, never by the extraordinary talents which he (or she) possesses. Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers submitted to the authority of the Word."

And Peter adds the essential point of *putting on humility*. Both leadership and followership work best when there's an abundance of humility. When we live and lead in the spirit and with the mind of Christ, we do so with his kind of humility, as expressed in Philippians 2:5-8. When we take on the servant spirit of the Lord Jesus and live by the way of the cross, we're given his grace and strength. So Peter (verse 5) quotes the Proverb (3:34) about how God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

When we live and serve with a "can do" attitude and even try to do good things in the church with a spirit of pride in our ability or our spirituality, we'll find ourselves fighting against God himself, who opposes the proud. True humility is simply the attitude of total dependence upon God and accepting the place of a servant rather than seeking positions of power and privilege.

"Our competence," The Apostle Paul says, "is from God" (2 Cor.3:5). In calling elders and other spiritual leaders to live and serve in a spirit of true, Christ-like humility, Peter is giving the key to true power and effectiveness in leadership. God's power comes to us through our weakness and awareness of our constant need to be led by his Spirit.

This humble dependence on God's grace to lift us up in our servant leadership is the key to this last statement in our text, where Peter speaks about *getting rid of anxiety*.

This is a precious word of encouragement: "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you" (7). Wouldn't life be different for some of us (myself included) if we applied this verse to our lives and to our ministries?

To cast our anxiety upon God is another way to talk about prayer. Prayer is the antidote to anxiety and the key to the peace that transcends all understanding (Phil. 4:6f). Prayer for me has become a daily "declaration of dependence" on God's grace. Those of us in leadership know that our greatest anxiety is often over our own weakness and failure, when our leadership can rightly be questioned, or when we face huge and seemingly overwhelming challenges or obstacles. I know I've often lain awake at night with anxiety over church decisions and conflicts. At such times I needed to cast my anxiety on almighty God, knowing he cares for me.

I learned early on not to be surprised by disagreement. My pastor father reminded me that God would always give me at least one person in the church who would keep me humble! So far I've not found anyone in Dale Heights.

We need to remember that the one who asks us to cast our anxieties on him is also the Chief Shepherd; the one Calvin says is "really the pastor." Although the Church of the risen Christ is in his hands, he nevertheless has given us servant leaders a humanly impossible task. I depend absolutely on God's grace for wisdom and the love of Christ in order to be faithful in fulfilling my calling.

The work of shepherding was commonplace in Bible times, unlike here in Dairy Land. Our image is often of a shepherd in a clean, white robe holding a cute little lamb in his arms. A sheep farmer told me that sheep are stupid and helpless, and have to be kept in fences and protected from wandering and predators. Shepherding in Jesus' and Peter's day was a dirty, dangerous and unglamorous business. But it was necessary work. And so is our under-shepherding.

I still need to occasionally look at my ordination certificate and remember my calling as God's under-shepherd. The signatures are faded from the passing of the years. But the call to shepherd his people is still clear.

My favorite shepherd image is a bronze desk piece given by a faithful church member. It's a South African shepherd, standing by his sheep, wearing a working hat and heavy boots. He's likely soiled and tired from a hard day's work. My desire is, that I can continue to fulfill my calling till the very end of my life, tired but with my boots still on.