

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is the Sunday we traditionally celebrate as “Good Shepherd Sunday”. It also marks a sort of turning point in our focus through the church year. As we draw close to the end of what we call the “festival” part of the church year, we transition from a focus on Jesus’ life, death and resurrection into a focus on the lives we live for him now. And our reading for today carries with it that kind of transition thought as we consider Good Shepherd Sunday.

Certainly we are aware of our Lord’s role as our Shepherd. And let’s be honest about ourselves, we need a shepherd. In the grand, spiritual scheme of things, we are...sheep. We wander, we’re pretty stupid about it all, and we’re basically helpless. On our own we will only get ourselves killed. We need a guide, we need a protector. And the Good Shepherd Jesus is exactly that. He is the one who willingly laid down his life for the sheep. He is the one who faced the enemy of sin and death and the devil and emerged triumphant, despite what it cost him. By his death our sins are paid and we are protected from the enemy. God is able to claim us as his own because we are washed clean.

And now that same Good Shepherd is here to guide us, to lead us on paths that will take us home. Paths that will avoid the greater dangers of this life. Paths that, though difficult at times, are the paths that lead to the prize of heaven. Ways through this life that keep and strengthen our faith despite the earthly cost, because that faith and trust in our Shepherd is the most valuable thing we have, and we cannot afford to lose it. We need our Shepherd to continue to guide and protect us, because on our own we will wander away, and we would be lost.

All this our Lord Jesus has done and continues to do for us. But it’s in how he accomplishes this ongoing goal of shepherding us is where we hit the transition and bridge from what Christ does to what he does in us and through us. And that is where our reading today comes in: <read text: 1 Peter 5:1-4>.

Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes one of the many sections of scripture that speak to those called to be shepherds of the flock of Christ. You see, God has provided for our care by appointing men to be his representatives on earth. In the case of physical care, that is accomplished by the government. But in the case of spiritual care, this is done through our pastors. Yes, our Chief Shepherd, as Peter calls him, is always watching us, always guiding us, always protecting us. And though he does not walk this earth visibly anymore, he could do all these things unseen on his own. Yet he understands our need for tangible support. To have someone nearby who can speak his word to us. And so he calls people to serve in his place, to be local shepherds under his direction.

That is what our pastors are. Pastor, of course, literally means “shepherd”. It is God who calls and appoints these men to care for us. Whose responsibility it is to serve us with his word. To strengthen and encourage us with that word. And to call us back with that word when we start to stray. The responsibility laid on the pastor is huge. And as a man, no one is truly equal to the task. But the work is accomplished through God’s power, not his own. It is God who shepherds through the man. It is God who gives strength and power to our pastors so that they may accomplish his purpose despite their own sinful failings.

Because despite the higher calling, our local shepherds are still human beings. And that means there will be sin. They are not perfect, they are not even better than you. They are not somehow closer to God than you. They do not have some magical connection to God that you don’t have. But what they have is a calling to watch you. To guide you for Christ’s sake as you carry out your earthly life. To serve you in this way because none of us are equal to this task on our own. We all have our own lives that keep us busy and distracted. We all have our own blind spots for sins where the devil can attack the easiest. We need someone whose time and concern is for watching and caring for our spiritual health.

That means that we, as sheep have an obligation to this shepherd as well. We support this shepherd because of the important work he does for us. We give of what God blesses us with so that this work can be carried out for us. We give because we recognize the value in the shepherd that God has given us. But more than that, we have an obligation to honor our local shepherd as Christ’s representative. That when we wander and he calls us back to treat that voice as if it were Christ’s. To listen when he speaks God’s word as though it were God speaking to us. To pray for him, that God would work through him despite his faults to carry out his will through our shepherd. And that God would keep him faithful and honest to the calling he has been given.

And so in many ways the relationship between yourself and your pastor should mirror the relationship of yourself and your Chief Shepherd, Christ. But in some respects, that we will explore more in a moment, the relationship is different, because even though your pastor has been called to represent Christ, he is not Christ. He is a human being, as

sinful as you. As much in need of forgiveness as you. And just as fallible as any of us. And so he is called to a different purpose, one that we must respect and honor. And yet in the ways that truly matter, he is no more than your equal.

And because of the unique status every believer enjoys before God, the encouragement and direction that Peter gives here does not just apply to your pastor. Perhaps in the narrowest sense it does, but it really does go beyond that. Because in a Christian congregation, more than just the pastor are asked to guide and lead, right? Though certainly the reference to the Chief Shepherd causes us to think of our pastor, Peter addresses this to the “elders” of a single congregation. These principles apply to any who hold a position of leadership or authority of any kind in the congregation. From the church president to the Sunday school teacher, they serve as examples to the rest, and they are called, each in their own area, to guide and lead.

All of us who are asked to serve these positions are given this same encouragement from Peter. We are to serve not because we must, but because we want. In the sense that it is not out of obligation but a compulsion for the Lord that cannot be denied. Because we love our Shepherd who laid down his life for us, we wish to act in return for him. The same reason we do anything we do as Christians is why we take up these positions of leadership and service. Because even though in earthly terms they might be called “leaders”, really in Christ they are positions of service. As Peter says here, not lording it over people but eager to serve.

And at the same time guiding. Even if it’s not actively, simply conforming your life to Christ is an act of guidance. It offers an example to those watching. And we are all watched by one another. And our mistakes and our carelessness can lead others into sin. The weak soul who sees us spread gossip or disregard the need to regularly be in and study God’s word or whatever it is, can easily adopt the attitude “if it’s good enough for that person, it must be okay.” We watch our life and doctrine closely because more than our own soul may be at stake.

Hopefully by this point you understand that really these principles apply to us all, regardless of what position we may occupy here in the earthly church. As I said before, your pastor may be called to perform a different role in the church than you, but that doesn’t mean he’s better than you. As we said, in all the ways that truly matter before God, he is the same as you. But that also means that in many ways your own responsibility before God is the same as his.

Peter may have been explicitly writing this section to the leaders of the church, but the encouragement here applies to us all. He might as well have been writing this to us all. In Christ we all are eager to serve him. Those acts of service may not always be public or recognized, but we are called to them all the same. In fact, I would venture as far as to say it is those thankless acts of service, the ones for which we are never recognized that are the higher calling. Because it is when we serve in any capacity without earthly reward that we are truly putting our faith in Christ and truly understanding the balance between ourselves and God.

It is then that we recognize that we have our reward from our God. We have the promise of the crown of glory that will never fade away. And a promise from God is as good as having it already. We have to wait to enjoy it, to be sure, but it is already ours in Christ. With that reward firmly ours already because of our Good Shepherd, we are free to serve now without need for recognition or compensation. And even our own silent acts of service serve to guide and inspire one another. As the pastor leads his congregation by example, every member who takes time out of their lives each week for worship or Bible Study serves as encouragement to the pastor. Every member who demonstrates that our God is more important than themselves is a joy that refreshes him. Their own lives for Christ are examples for him that keep him strong on the path he is asked to walk.

Though God has established for an earthly shepherd in our walk here on earth, he has not separated the body of Christ in doing so. We may have different roles, but we are all part of the one church, we all fulfill different functions, but in the ways that truly matter we are all together in this, all the same. And we work together for that one great purpose; to honor the God who loved us enough to die for us, to build ourselves up in his truth and share that truth with the world.

Because ultimately, whether you hear it from your pastor or another member, it is the voice of the Good Shepherd that keeps us going, that shows us where to go and gives us the strength we need to carry on. That voice is found in his word, and it is that word that we need most of all. My brothers and sisters, my flock in Christ, listen to the voice of your shepherd, from wherever you hear it, and that voice will lead you safely to eternal life.

Amen.