

+ John 21:15-17 + The Shepherd Feeds His Sheep +
+ Third Sunday after the Epiphany: St. Timothy, Pastor and Confessor + 24 January 2010 +

My father is a pastor. In his office there used to hang a drawing of a cross. Within that cross were the words of an article in beautiful calligraphy. In the midst of all that elegant lettering, in large letters was the question, "What does a pastor do?" Here's how the article answers...

The pastor visits the sick and shut-in and dying, prepares and conducts worship services and Bible studies and confirmation classes, writes sermons, baptizes young and old, forgives the penitent and warns the impenitent, counsels and marries couples, plans and attends meetings, buries the dead, minds the upkeep of the church and plans for the future, trains the young and encourages the old, reaches out to the lost and equips God's people to serve Jesus, all the while balancing time spent with family and with ministry. So then the pastor can only smile after a busy week of ministry, when a man bellows, "What a job working only one hour a week!"

Yes, a pastor does work a little more than one hour a week, but what does he really do? The answer lies in that little, familiar word "pastor". It's an old Latin word that means "shepherd". God's Old Testament people considered their faithful leaders to be "shepherds of the nation", like King David, who once was a shepherd. Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd. For centuries, those who have served as public ministers of God's people have been called "pastor" or "shepherd". So what does a shepherd do?

A shepherd feeds and tends and cares for his flock. He leads the flock to good water and pastures. He cares for the lambs and the sick, while ever minding the older sheep. He protects the flock from attack by wolves or other dangers and even searches for a stray sheep. That's a very appropriate description of those in public ministry who serve not their own flock, but the flock of the Good Shepherd, who cares for every one of them.

As we remember St. Timothy and give thanks for God's gift of the ministry, we see how **THE SHEPHERD FEEDS HIS SHEEP** with the rich goodness of his grace through the service of faithful shepherds. We see that displayed in John 21, as Jesus forgives and calls Peter to a life of service.

Simon Peter was in bad shape. It was a Thursday night and he was weeping. That very night he had sworn that he would even lay down his life for the Master. He had boasted that even if all the other disciples would fall away from the Lord's side, he never would. At Gethsemane that night, Peter had even tried to defend Jesus with a poorly directed sword swipe that took off a servant's ear. All of that meant nothing, though, when he found himself warming by a courtyard fire. While Jesus stood on trial, Peter faced the questioning of a far less frightening group of people—curious servant-girls and weary temple guards, but Peter, the "rock", failed to live up to his name.

"You also were with Jesus of Galilee..." "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth..." "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." With every accusation, Peter denied his Lord all the more strongly. The "Rock", who had so boldly confessed Christ, became "sand" as he called down curses on himself in denial of his Lord. Immediately a rooster crowed. Peter remembered Jesus' words, **"Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."** Just then Simon caught the gaze of Jesus and realized what he had done. He fled, weeping bitter tears of guilt.

Simon Peter was in bad shape. It was a sunny morning along the Sea of Galilee and he couldn't look Jesus in the eye. Just days before the now-risen Jesus had appeared to him, but the guilt of his denial had humbled Peter. He needed Jesus' forgiveness, so Jesus asked him, **"Simon son of John, do you truly love me with a purposeful, sacrificial love more than these?"** Filled with self-sacrificing love for Peter, Jesus wanted to know if Simon loved him more than any other disciple loved him. Surely this reminded Simon of his boast, but he wasn't going to boast anymore. In fact, he even used a word for a lesser degree of love to express how little he deserved to have such bold, self-sacrificing love for Christ. **"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."** Jesus responded, **"Feed my lambs."**

Jesus asked another question. **"Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"** This time Jesus wanted to know if there was any of that self-sacrificing love left in Peter. Simon answered humbly, **"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."** In turn Jesus commanded, **"Shepherd my sheep."**

Jesus had one more question, this time using the word for love that Peter had been using. **"Simon son of John, do you love me?"** Simon realized what his loving Shepherd was doing and it cut him to the core. Was there any love for his Lord left at all? Three times he had denied Jesus. Three times Jesus led him to confess his love for the Savior. **"He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.'"** Jesus responded with one more command, **"Feed my sheep."**

What was Jesus doing and why did he do it? Jesus knew how the guilt of sin had crushed his fallen disciple. Jesus knew what he needed most. Simon didn't need seven easy steps to a better attitude or forty days of confidence. He needed the rich goodness of God's grace. He needed to hear that his sins were forgiven. With every command to feed the lambs or tend the flock of God, Jesus was declaring Simon forgiven and placing him back on the path of

faithful service to his Lord. As a sheep in the Shepherd's flock, Simon needed to feed on the rich goodness of God's grace to cleanse his guilty soul and strengthen him for the task ahead.

By nature, you and I are in bad shape too. On our own, we're left with shallow pride and empty effort. We're quick to put on a bold appearance, when underneath we're weak and corrupt. Arrogant and hurtful words flow from our lips, while our hands commit loveless, thoughtless actions. By nature, we are all like sheep without a shepherd, going astray each to his or her own way. In the end, our selfish thoughtlessness leaves us spiritually hungry, crushed with guilt, and on the dangerous, deadly path to hell.

Still the Good Shepherd loves his wayward sheep with a purposeful, sacrificial love. He feeds every member of his flock with the rich goodness of his grace, rich goodness earned and poured out on a cross. The faithful Shepherd condemns our guilty hearts with the harsh, cutting, killing words of his holy Law, but with unimaginable grace he heals and cares for every one of us with the good news of his Gospel. Ah, the good news of the Shepherd, who lay down his life for wandering sheep only to take that life up again to save them! The Shepherd feeds his sheep with the life-changing food of his Word, the life-giving waters of Holy Baptism, and the strengthening meal of his Holy Supper, all wrapped in his forgiveness and grace.

So how does the Good Shepherd get that rich goodness of his grace to the sheep? The truth is sheep are not smart animals. They can't defend themselves. They spend their lives face down in the grass. On their own, they would probably go hungry or become a quick snack for a wolf. They need a faithful shepherd to feed and care and tend them.

That's how the Good Shepherd operates too. Remember what he called Simon Peter to do. ***"Feed my lambs."*** ***"Shepherd my sheep."*** ***"Feed my sheep."*** With his forgiveness and grace, Jesus called Simon Peter to be a shepherd of God's flock. Doesn't that strike you as a little odd? Here you have a disciple who had publicly denied Jesus now being called to serve as Christ's under-shepherd, called to faithfully feed and tend the flock of God. It seems odd because you and I probably wouldn't entrust such a task to such an unreliable servant, but in his grace, Jesus entrusted his flock to sinful Simon Peter, just as he did with every other apostle, including St. Paul, who had literally hunted down Christians, but yet Christ in his grace called him to faith and to faithfully shepherd his flock. Isn't that remarkable?

The Lord entrusts the care of his Church, the care of souls to sinful men, who can only carry out the task because they have received the rich goodness of the Shepherd's grace themselves. Timothy was called to be such a shepherd. He came from a home, where his pagan father could care less about religion, but his mother and grandmother had faithfully trained him in the ways of the Lord. He was a sinner, who didn't deserve the privilege of being a pastor, a shepherd of God's flock, but it was grace that made him a shepherd. The same is true of your pastor and the pastors who have served you over the years. The same is true of Lutheran school teachers too. All sinful. All undeserving of the task. All called to shepherd purely by the grace of the Good Shepherd, so the rich goodness of his grace can be given to every one of his lambs and sheep.

Earlier we sang, ***"Hark! The voice of Jesus crying, 'Who will go and work today?'"*** I remember singing that hymn as a kid right before hearing a missionary speak and getting excited, because I wanted to be a pastor. In his grace the Lord made that possible. Jesus still tends and feeds his sheep today as he stirs the hearts of men to enter the pastoral ministry and the hearts of men and women to enter the teaching ministry. Still the work is plentiful and the workers are few. The need for faithful shepherds grows all the more urgent as the hearts of many grow cold and the day of our Lord's return approaches, but who will tend the next generation—the Lord's flocks, the Lord's lambs? Young men and women, have you considered such a task for yourself? Parents, could your son become a pastor like young Timothy someday serving one of God's flocks? Could your son or daughter serve the Lord's lambs as a teacher leading them to follow the Shepherd?

Perhaps you're in no position or have no desire to become a pastor or teacher or staff minister, but you can still be like Paul or Timothy's fellow members in Lystra and Derbe. You can encourage and support those who are training or could train to serve as faithful shepherds of God's flock. You can support those who now serve you as faithful shepherds, who bring you and others the rich goodness of God's grace in Word and Sacraments. Living in the rich goodness of God's grace, you can serve as a model and example for the next generation, helping to train them up in the ways of the Lord like Timothy's mom and grandma. With your prayers and service and offerings, you can help the Good Shepherd feed and care for his flock.

Jesus will feed his flock with the rich goodness of his grace, but he needs shepherds to do the job. What a privilege we have to serve the Good Shepherd! May Christ our Savior in his grace provide shepherds like Timothy and Peter to faithfully serve his flock now and always! Amen.