

“Tending the Flock”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 100 New Testament Lesson – 1 Peter 5:2-11

Michael S. Hamilton, in his article titled “Willow Creek’s place in history,”¹ asks, “How long will seeker services be popular?” (For those who don’t know, Willow Creek is a multi-generational Evangelical Christian megachurch near Chicago.) Founded in 1975, the church now has three weekend services averaging 24,000 attendees.

Hamilton continues, “In what direction will cultural tastes in music, drama and architecture change? What new ideas for evangelism and church life will arise and compete with those of Willow Creek? ...

How long will the economy in the Chicago area thrive? What happens if Willow Creek’s neighbors change – if Starbucks, Lexus, the AMC cineplex and Ikea move out and are replaced by Bob’s Package Liquor, Larry’s Auto Credit, South Barrington Adults Only and Coach’s Rent-to-Own?”

“History seems to show,” says Hamilton, “that dynamic, growing churches require a combination of spiritual wisdom, cultural discernment, visionary leadership, talented management, favorable demographics, and adequate financial resources. Remove any of these, and the church begins to fade. Bringing them all together is hard enough; keeping them together for a long time is nearly impossible.”

That said, what are we doing here? Are we as a church here to grow the next Willow Creek – or to restore the past First Presbyterian? You know, the time when there were upwards of a thousand members here and we had to raise these stained-glass doors and set up overflow seating in the Parlour? I know some of you don’t know about that, but that was First Church back in the day.

With that history behind us and the lure of bigger churches such as Willow-Creek in Chicago or Church of the Resurrection in Leawood out ahead of us, what are we to do?

Well, Peter answers us, saying, “Tend the flock of God that is in your charge;” to which we add, by honoring the past, celebrating the present, and embracing the future. And Peter gives us a model for how we as Christians ought to tend the flock: “not under compulsion but willingly;” “not for sordid gain but eagerly.”

¹ Christianity Today, November 13, 2000, 68.

“Be examples to the flock,” says Peter. “Accept the authority of the elders,” which is to say, seek out the guidance of more experienced Christians who can mentor us in our Christian walk. “And all of (us) must clothe (ourselves) with humility in (our) dealings with one another,” to use Peter’s words.

Serve willingly, eagerly and with humility – that’s what we are called to do, that’s how we are called to be the church. But how do we do that amid the struggle we face to keep our own lives together, let alone trying to tend to the lives of others, the flock of God that is shepherded and cared for by this church and members and friends of this congregation?

What makes any one of us think we have anything to contribute to the wellbeing and Christian nurture of others? When we look at this church as it was in the past, what it is now, and what it might be – or not be – in the future, how do we deal with the anxiety and fear that so easily overtakes us?

The answer is we stand strong in faith, seeking to do the next right thing as directed by God through the shared, Spirit-filled leadership of the church. And we participate in that leadership ourselves – all of us, everyone from the youth to their elders, both new members and old-timers; even regular visitors and one-time guest are invited to help shape who we are and how we do what we do.

But that take our active participation, which again is hard to balance given our busy lives. It’s hard to get involved as a newcomer, as someone with lots of questions about where they might fit it and how they might serve. And it’s hard for long-time members who have served year after year, given the resignation and fatigue that can set in, spiritual resignation and physical fatigue.

Now let me say, no one is called to serve or participate in the church to their own injury or detriment. Sometimes, we just can’t give any more, and that’s OK. That’s also part of being one of many within God’s flock – accepting the care and nurture of the church. But (when) our sense of resignation or fatigue comes from letting the world have its way with us, that’s when stepping up and moving past such a barricade can become a real growth opportunity, both for us and for the church, both spiritually and numerically.

When as a newcomer, you haven’t yet reached out to anyone here with your desire to be more involved – or if you’re letting any failure on our part in reaching out to you get in the way – that’s when standing up for your own involvement here can lead to some wonderful opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.

God did not call us here to get stopped by any barriers we may encounter, whether from within our own hearts and minds or those that arise in the world around us, even those that arise from within our admittedly imperfect church. Peter says, “Cast all your anxiety on (God), because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” “Resist him” says Peter, “steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”

We are not the first church to face a fluctuation in membership. You are not the first Christian to struggle with how God is calling you to respond.

To be an active participant in building up the church, both spiritually and numerically, you may have to push through a little resistance – sometimes a lot of resistance. But that’s no reason not to try. And in fact, we’ve got some great reasons to push through to what God has in store for us, and ample evidence that it can be done.

The church that Peter was originally writing to was the church in Asia Minor in the 1st Century after Jesus walked the earth. And through every century since, and across all the lands of the globe, Christians have faced questions of relevancy, stability and even survival.

In finding their way past these questions – in finding our way forward – they and we turn to the divine promise and guidance of Holy Scripture. It is by following the teachings of Jesus Christ and by trusting the future to God that Christians down through the centuries have survived and thrived and come alive!

“Ever wonder what is the No. 1 reason why (church) visitors return and eventually become members? A survey of 26 mainline congregations in the U.S. revealed that the No. 1 reason is ... (that) ‘the congregation acts like it really believes Jesus is alive through a ‘collective effervescence’ that pervades everything that is done.’²

That comes from an article by Ronald Scates titled “Why They Come, Why They Stay.” According to Scates, church growth has less to do with what you do as a church and more to do with who you are when you’re doing it. Terrence K. Hayes and Herb Mather begin their book on smaller-membership churches by telling a humorous story about the abstract artist Pablo Picasso.

One day, it seems Picasso surprised an intruder in his home. “The intruder got away, but Picasso told the police he could do a rough sketch of him. Basing the intruder’s appearance on Picasso’s cubist drawing, the police could have arrested a nun, a washing machine, or the Eiffel Tower!” The authors then ask: “If you described your church, would anyone recognize it from your description?”³

One person might take a look at First Presbyterian, and see a dying church. Another might look to a future of growth and revival. Yet another might look at First Church today and see personal salvation, the type of salvation that comes from the care and nurture of a good shepherd.

In talking with visitors and new members of First Presbyterian Church, I hear again and again how they are attracted to the warm, genuine welcome they receive, and the sense of Christ’s Spirit that they encounter here.

² Ronald Scates, “Why They Come, Why They Stay,” *Reformed Worship*, March 1996, 11-13.

³ Hayes and Mather, *Collaborating in Ministry* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 1993), 1.

Both long-term members and newcomers tell me that this church means the world to them, because it was and is always there for them in a time of need. Having a warm, genuinely welcoming and Spirit-filled congregation will carry us a long way. Tending to the flock of God as it finds its way to the doors of this church will carry us a long way, as we provide for spiritual growth and material assistance. And going forth like the Good Shepherd to bring in the lost sheep will carry us a long way, as we reach out in a spirit of nurture and care, and testify to the love of Christ with our words and actions.

But to do that, we need to continue to step up and to “tend the flock of God” that is in our charge, and prepare a way for those who are lost to come into the sheepfold.

In the weeks ahead, we will focus our sermon time on three questions: First, “what areas of growth are available to us as a church, as a congregation;” second, “how do we achieve this growth;” and third, “what does this mean for us individually – personally – when it comes to our own spiritual and material wellbeing, our growth and our giftedness.”

When faced with the challenge to serve willingly, eagerly and with humility – like a shepherd caring for his or her flock – when that’s what we are called to do as the church, how do we as individuals stand up to that challenge? It’s not easy being the church God calls us to be! How do we keep going?

Again, the answer comes to us from Peter, where he says, “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” It’s not upon our strength and talents that the church will be built up and thrive, but upon Christ himself, with God’s help.

When we push through any resistance we may feel – whether internal from our own sense of limitation, or external from a world that fails to see or appreciate what we’re doing here – when we withstand any such difficulties willingly, eagerly and humbly – God meets us to carry us forward.

Our promise as Christians is not that the road ahead will be easy. Our promise is that when we faithfully and actively travel along that road, we will be met by One who will lift us up when we fall, feed us when we hunger and thirst, and smile upon us when we persevere. As Peter says, “When the chief shepherd appears, (we) will win the crown of glory that never fades away.”

So I guess the question is, when you put your feet on the floor each morning, who are you – who I am each morning – entrusting myself to; who am I dedicating myself to? Do I turn myself over to the world and to those who are lost within it and follow their misguided way, or do we turn our lives over to the Chief Shepherd, who alone knows our strengths and abilities, and who alone is able to meet all our needs?

Pastoral Prayer

Dear Lord, You entered into the world and became flesh so that the love that abides with the world still could be seen and felt. By your grace, enable us to enter into your vibrant, restorative life with loving and caring action, as your spirit shall lead.

For you, O Lord, are our shepherd, our protector and guide. In your gentle care, we have all that we need.

When we are weary, you bring restfulness to our bodies. When we are thirsty, you nourish us with abundance.

When our spirits are weak and troubled, your Spirit refreshes our hearts. You guide us on our journey so that we will walk with strength and purpose.

If we walk through the deepest valleys of trouble, disease or sorrow, we are not afraid, for you are right there beside us.

Even in the presence of hatred and violence, your peace-filled love takes away the hatred and gives rise to the beloved community. O God, you are simply amazing.

Your strength and your awesome presence, your love and your grace always comfort us.

Surely your goodness and your peace will be with us all of our days, and we will live in your eternal home forever and ever.

For all this and so very much more, awesome God, we say thank you, in the name of Jesus Christ, the great shepherd, who lead us to say together when we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.