

**THE GOOD PASTOR**  
**Christ the King Sunday –Women’s Association Thank Offering Sunday – November 20, 2011**  
**Ezekiel 34: 11-24**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

Always be ready to preach. When Pastor Randy came down with pneumonia on Thursday I realized, of course, that I should be ready to proclaim the gospel at the drop of a hat today. So I am taking the text he chose and some of the ideas he had generated and am putting them in a sermon for us today. In a way I am preaching and in a way Randy is preaching today. And you will understand what I mean by that at the end of the sermon...

What a great text this is from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel! The entire passage speaks of bad shepherds who feed themselves and of good shepherds who feed their sheep. A bad pastor takes care of himself; a good pastor takes care of those who have been entrusted to him by God. The prophet Ezekiel is making a commentary on the state of ministry in his time but it may also be a commentary on the state of ministry in our time as well. Western PA may well be the last bastion of pastor-ing where in-home visits are still expected and done. It is hard work and time consuming. This desire to connect with people, not just through worship and programs, but pastorally is almost unique to our area. In an earlier day, one of the prime tasks of pastors was visitation. But in many parts of the country this is deemed almost quaint and old fashioned today.

I remember coming to a new church in the Midwest; coming from the church in Hickory here in Washington County, where the expectation was that as a pastor you better visit, if great Aunt Effie’s cousin, twice removed, by a previous marriage, related to the Masqueliers, got a hang nail, you better visit. I came to my new church in the Midwest with this as an expectation. So I was not there very long when I was going through the church directory and noted a woman’s name listed there that was the same name as one of the former beloved pastors of the church. So I called her on the phone to set up a visit in her home. Unbeknownst to me she had just called the church office to schedule the church Bridge Club meeting in the East Parlor. I was so new I didn’t know there was a bridge club, let alone that she was the head of it. Because my predecessor hadn’t visited anyone in the congregation for more than ten years prior to my arrival, this woman was just certain that I was visiting to inform her that as a pastor I was against card playing in the church and had come to tell her that the bridge club couldn’t meet there anymore. So before I visited she had called the five tables of the club to say, “Maybe we won’t be playing on the 15<sup>th</sup>; maybe we will.” So unwittingly I had already created a controversy in my new church. I had no idea any of this was happening behind the scenes so I went to visit her expecting a nice, no-agenda visit; she offered me cookies which I turned down because I had just had lunch (the way she relates the story is she says, “Ouch, he was so angry he didn’t even accept one of my cookies!”) So I have what I think is a lovely visit and am prepared to go so I ask her if there is anything I can pray about and she blurts out to me –“I can’t stand it anymore; I know you’re here to tell me we cannot play bridge in the church anymore!!!!” I thought I had entered the Twilight Zone! But when I explained I didn’t know there was a bridge club let alone that she was the head of it, let alone I am not opposed to playing bridge, then we laughed hysterically, became best of friends from that day onward. That, by the way, is why you visit, to wind up a lot closer than before you visited.

Personally, I don’t know how a pastor cannot visit his people. How do we know what programs to do if they are not addressing what’s really going on in people’s lives? How do we know what to preach if it is disconnected from our people? How do we foster the close connections in the church which are essential to be the Body of Christ if we and the elders don’t visit? There is something almost magical

about sitting in someone's living room and speaking with them about matters of faith. Bad pastors feed themselves; good pastors feed their sheep. That's what the prophet Ezekiel is saying. That's what the modern church needs to re-learn. Perhaps this lies at the root of the decline of the American church.

The prophet notes God declaring: *"I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some are scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep..."* (Ezekiel 34: 11) A good shepherd seeks out his sheep, especially when something in their life scatters them, causes them not to come to church, causes them to run away from God. Jesus certainly had this passage in the back of His head when He told the familiar story of the one sheep and the ninety and nine and how the good shepherd always goes out to rescue the one sheep who is lost. That's what good shepherds do; that's what bad shepherds do not do.

The prophet notes and God declares through the prophet Ezekiel: *"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak..."* (Ezekiel 34: 16) *"I have come to seek and to save the lost"*, sayeth the Lord. When the good shepherd looks out on the sheep it is like when Jesus looked out on the crowds. Jesus certainly had this Ezekiel passage in mind when it was said of Him: *"When (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* (Matthew 9: 36) The good shepherd has COMPASSION and sees his sheep not as a burden but sees them as people who need the Lord, who need a bit of compassion in their life, who are harassed and helpless and need the Prince of Peace to enter into their lives and give them what they truly need. That's what good shepherds do; that's what bad shepherds do not do.

The prophet concludes this section of Ezekiel 34 by declaring who this shepherd is and what this shepherd shall do. He declares: *"I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd..."* (Ezekiel 34: 23) There is one shepherd in the lineage of David and that is Jesus; one shepherd alive creates one sheepfold alive with His presence; one good shepherd who is Jesus draws all men, all sheep, unto Himself. *"In Him all things hold together."* He is the GOOD Shepherd and as Jesus says, *"My sheep know my voice and follow me."* He is the Good Shepherd and He is the One who leadeth us beside still waters and to green pastures; He is the One who leadeth us in paths of righteousness and through the Valley of the Shadow of Death; He is the Good Shepherd, the *"ONE shepherd"*, whom to follow is to know goodness and mercy following us all the days of our lives, and He, Jesus Christ, is the Good Shepherd, whom to follow allows us to say in trust and in confidence: *"And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever..."* (Psalm 23)

The Good Shepherd feeds the sheep, says this passage. *"He shall feed them and be their shepherd"*. The bad shepherd by contrast does not feed the sheep. Surely this passage from Ezekiel is what Jesus had in mind when He has that exchange with the Apostle Peter toward the end of the Gospel of John --The rather enigmatic "Feed My Sheep" passage. Jesus begins his exchange with Peter by asking, *"Do you love me more than these?"* (John 21: 15) And Peter responds-- *"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."* And Jesus then says: *"Feed my Lambs."* But irritatingly Jesus asks again, as if He didn't hear Peter the first time, *"Do you love me?"* and Peter responds, *"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."* And Jesus says, then, *"Tend my Sheep."* And as if to impress His point, and as if to parallel the three betrayals Peter earlier had done when the cock crowed, Jesus asks one more time, *"Do you love me?"* And Peter, surely exasperated by now, replies, *"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."* And Jesus says, then, *"Feed my Sheep."*

But we miss some of the subtlety of the Greek language if we do not understand that in essence Jesus is asking, “Do you love me with an AGAPE love? Do you love me with a divine love? Do you love me with a self-sacrificial, compassionate, willing to suffer for someone else, go-to-the-cross-and-die-for-me kind of love? And Peter responds with PHILEO love. He responds with a love based upon friendship, brotherly love and affection. And Jesus keeps asking Peter the question until Peter gets it right. Jesus is saying the love of which I speak is not mere friendship; it is rather a cross bearing, costly love; it is a compassionate, suffering with kind of love; it is a love willing to sacrifice all and to die kind of love.

**Peter, It is with this kind of AGAPE love with which you will feed MY sheep.** Jesus says, IF you love me as I have loved you, then you will love your sheep as I have loved you. If you expect to receive my Agape love and be fed and nourished by it, but you are not willing to give that self same love to the sheep, then you are just a bad shepherd, feeding yourself on my love, but not feeding others with the same love you have received...

Randy texted me on Friday not to do anything “heroic”. He is in Intensive Care at Shadyside Hospital and he was saying not to come in on Friday. He then also called me on the phone to remind me that it was light up night in downtown Pittsburgh so the traffic would be terrible. When I nevertheless visited him I said to him, “Randy, you are the most heroic pastor I have ever met.” He is the one who has visited us when we are homebound. He is the one who has visited us and prayed for us when we are in the hospital. He is the one who in Henri Nowen’s elegant little phrase is a “Wounded Healer”, a person who has chosen to use his own affliction to tenderize his own heart and to use that to help and to heal and to pray with and to lift up so many others. Randy, no, there’s nothing heroic about dragging yourself out of a sickbed, covering your head with a cap, oxygen by your side, every breath labored and costly, no there is nothing, dear friend and brother, about loving us so much and having so much compassion for us and seeking to feed us and showing us the love Jesus has for us, no, Randy, no, my brother, you are the most heroic pastor I have ever known.

Jesus to Randy –“Do you love me?” Randy to Jesus –“Jesus you know I do I have fed my sheep with Agape Love.” And that, beloved, is Randy’s sermon to us, based on Ezekiel 34, today.

Behold, the Good Shepherd alive within the heart of the Good Pastor! Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA  
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*