

*My Shepherd Will Supply My Need*

Often, when a baseball team is in a slump, the manager will say, we need to get back to the fundamentals. If a team has lost its mastery of the basic skills and isn't executing the simplest plays well, they won't win very often. So the manager will schedule a practice reviewing base running, bunting, and hitting the cutoff man.

When I was at the Gettysburg Seminary last week for the Spring Convocation, one of the speakers recited some discouraging statistics, saying that the church is in a slump. In the last 20 years church membership in the United States has declined by about 20%. In that same time period the number of people unaffiliated with any religious group has tripled. What is the cause behind that kind of change? I'm sure the reasons are complex and varied, but I am also sure that part of the problem is a failure of the church to adequately teach the basics of our faith.

As they say on the Internet, IMHO (in my humble opinion) political, cultural, and social issues have often distracted the church from teaching and practicing the foundational Christian beliefs and doctrines. Ask an un-churched person what Christians believe and they will likely answer with something about politics, or money, or sexuality, or the evolution vs. Creationism debate. The study the speaker cited said that the words people most often associate with Christian are "hypocritical" and "prejudiced."

Obviously, that is not the image and message the church should be projecting in general. And in particular, I don't think that image fits our congregation. That's not our message. Perhaps part of the varied and complex reasons that The Good Shepherd Church has remained steady and consistent, and even grown a bit, in our ministry and mission over the last decade or so is that we have faithfully used the resources God has given us to teach and proclaim the time-tested and true essentials of our faith.

We have no other agenda than to tell the world about Jesus, reiterating what St. Peter said about him, that "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." Our goal as the people of God in this place is, as St. John wrote, "That we should believe in the name of [God's] Son Jesus Christ and love one another." That's what we're all about here: salvation in Christ and love for our neighbors.

When we think about the analogy that David the Psalmist used for the Lord, likening Him to a good shepherd, we see that first and foremost the good shepherd tends to the main needs of the sheep. He provides them with basic things like food and water. We human beings tend to think that our possessions are all our accomplishments, and we forget that having our needs met is really a blessing from God. We often forget that we are absolutely dependent on God for everything.

If you woke up this morning with a roof over your head, you are blessed. Many people today are homeless. If there was food in your refrigerator, you are blessed. Many people today are hungry. If you have some type of

income, you are blessed. Many people today have no income at all. If you have access to health care, you are blessed. Many people today do not. Yes, economic times are hard, and many of us can't live in the style we have become accustomed to. But if we receive our daily bread, and have shelter, and have some potential for a better future, we are more blessed than most people in the world today, and we should be grateful to God for whatever he has shared with us.

Of course, it is not only, or even primarily, our needs for food, shelter and other material things that are the most important concerns of Jesus, our Good Shepherd. When Jesus was tempted he rebuked the devil saying, "Man does live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Our relationship with our Heavenly Father is more important than what we are going to eat today. Of utmost importance is that we hear and know God and His will for us through His Word, and that we live by that Word and respond to it with prayer and praise.

In the past few weeks I have a number of conversations with people about the Bible (the Word) and prayer. People have frequently asked me for advice on how to read the Bible and how to pray. Practical, faithful instruction for their members on Bible reading and prayer is just the kind of foundational things that churches have been overlooking in their preaching and teaching. Today I'd like to offer you some thoughts on both.

The Bible is God's Word to us and for us. God reveals Himself to us in Holy Scripture. It is where He speaks to us. We would be hard pressed to find God or know God outside His Word. Virtually all we can know about

God comes from the Bible. In the Bible is everything we need to know about our salvation. We Lutherans say that the Bible is the rule and norm for all doctrine. That means that all we say and do as the church must be grounded in Holy Scripture. The fact is, though, that sometimes even the church goes against the teachings of Scripture and then it must be corrected by the Word. But if we are going to be informed by the Bible, if we are going to let the Bible shape and mold our Christian lives, we need to know what it says. We need to actually read the Bible. The Bible is our spiritual food and drink. We need to take it in frequently, preferably daily.

I know several people in our congregation right now who are reading the Bible cover-to-cover. That's good, but a lot of people who try to do that get bogged down in Leviticus and Numbers; they can be pretty dry reading. Reading the New Testament first might be a good idea. It's relatively short, you could do it in a night or two, and then when you go back and read the Old Testament you'll see how it all fits together. Or you could read the entire Bible in a year or two years using a Bible reading plan. Each Sunday in our bulletin, in the announcements section, there are suggested Bible readings for the week. Or in the Lutheran Book of Worship, on page 179, there is a two-year Bible reading schedule. Feel free to take an LBW home if you want to use that; there's a bunch of them on the shelf in the narthex. Feel free to borrow one as long as you need it, we've got plenty. Or there are Bible reading schedules online, or I could copy for you one I have. The bottom line is: Any way you read the Bible, in any order, is a good way. Just read it.

Likewise, just about any Bible translation can be good. We use the New Revised Standard Version mostly here in worship. The New International Version is also good, as is the New English Bible and several others. For an ultra-modern but insightful paraphrase of the Bible, you might want to check out a version known as “The Message.” Again, if you don’t have a Bible -- a reasonably-sized Bible in modern English, those super-sized King James Bibles that are just for show don’t count -- I’d be glad to lend you one. See me.

Some people like to take their scripture readings in smaller doses, and that’s okay too. A devotional book, with perhaps just a verse or two of scripture and then some commentary, is a very good way to engage the Word. I’m always amazed at how popular our Lenten and Advent devotional booklets are. Well, you can keep up a spiritual discipline like that all year long. On the table in the narthex are various devotional books. If you’d like one, take one. There are large print ones, and ones for families with children -- there’s something there for everybody. Some have church library cards in them but, honestly, I don’t care if we ever get them back or not. The most important thing is that you get comfortable with the Scriptures. I also have tons of devotional books in my office. I’m always happy to lend anything from my library.

A lot of the devotional books also have prayers. Last week in the sermon I said something about pouring your heart out to God in prayer and then using prayers other people have written when you run out of your own words. I think that comment hit a responsive chord with a lot of people and I’d like to reaffirm that and expound on it a little more. When we pray we don’t have

to worry being about eloquent or poetic. Prayer is even for those of us without good creative speech skills. God knows what's in our hearts and minds even before we say it anyway. Putting our thoughts and emotions into words is more for own benefit than His. Prayer sustains and deepens the relationship God begins with us through his Word. Prayer is also essential, another blessing Jesus the Good Shepherd shares with us.

What should we say to God? There are a lot of resources on how to compose prayers, including some in a nice April issue of "The Lutheran" magazine that has a special prayer theme, also available free in the narthex in the literature rack. For many people prayer is like a shopping list of "Dear God, I want... I need..." It doesn't have to be like that. Often when teaching about prayer I suggest the acronym ACTS. A stands for Acclamation. Begin your prayer praising God; think about all the great things God has done; tell God you love Him. C stands for Confession. We all sin and God knows we have sinned. Telling God about our sins and asking His forgiveness frees us from our guilt. Our forgiveness is assured in Jesus' love for us. T stands for Thanksgiving. Thank God for all your blessings: food, shelter, people that love you, all the good things. And finally, S stands for Supplication. Tell God what you need, and don't just think of yourself. Think of all your brothers and sisters, those close by and those far away. Prayer unites us with God and one another in that way.

Prayer and the Word are two ways our Good Shepherd provides for us. In those ways he leads us in the paths of righteousness. That basic, that's fundamental, but so very important. When we follow in faith where he leads, we know how good it is to be with the Good Shepherd. Amen.