

The Heart of a Shepherd

By Linda Rex

October 29, 2023, Proper 25 / After Pentecost—As October comes to an end, we celebrate our pastors and elders, and all those who serve in pastoral ministry. Last week in this blog, I wrote about how we participate in the kingdom of God, growing in our close fellowship with God and one another, living right now by the Spirit in the reality of all God has done for us in Jesus. On our spiritual journey, we are often accompanied by those who God has called and gifted to be shepherds, who point us to Christ and offer the Word of God and prayer to us in some way.

In our New Testament passage for this Sunday, 1 Thessalonians 2:1–8, the apostle Paul makes pains to clarify his motives and efforts in his ministry to the believers in the church in Thessalonica. Apparently, there were people who were accusing Paul of greed, impurity, deceit, and using flattery to win people over. Paul felt he needed to defend his position, emphasizing that he wasn't like the shady traveling philosophers who commonly preyed upon unsuspecting followers. Rather he had the heart of a nursing mother—one who tenderly cared for her own.

In explaining himself, Paul revealed how he had come to have God's heart for the members in Thessalonica. He could have insisted on being paid money for his upkeep, but instead, he often labored to pay his own way. He could have thrown around his apostolic authority (whatever that might have been), but he didn't. Instead, he was gentle, and at the same time, firm about the good news or gospel. He did not falter when it came to Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God, even if it meant he had to go through suffering and mistreatment (like he had in Philippi).

Paul was manifesting in his life and ministry the heart of Jesus, who had been willing to stoop to the lowest level—our sin, evil, and death—to bring us up with him into his intimate fellowship with his Father in the Spirit. This is the heart of the Great Shepherd, who did not think that it was beneath him to set aside the privileges of his divinity to join us in our humanity, so that we could be set free to love God and love others as was always intended.

Being a pastor or spiritual shepherd can be a very lonely experience. Pastors and elders often have to make difficult decisions, tell painful truths, hear agonizing and traumatic stories, and pray for people when it seems all hope is lost. There are at times the joys of new birth, of new converts, of weddings and family celebrations. But when things go wrong, it is often the pastor who becomes the scapegoat, and it is often the long-suffering elder who takes the midnight call simply because he or she has the heart of Jesus for those in distress or need.

I have known and met some amazing people over the years who are pastors. It used to be that I didn't feel safe to even talk to a pastor—but that has changed. And now that I have been one, I understand more of the journey that a person goes on when they respond to the call to pastoral ministry. A pastor is a brother or sister who has been given a unique calling and gifting to care for others as a shepherd, in union and communion with our Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. They are people who often are just as weak, broken, and sinful as the rest of us, only perhaps a little more seasoned and road-weary, and a bit wiser, with a gift from God that enables them to share what they've been given with others.

First, I would like to thank every one of the men and women over the years who have invested in my life and have spoken truth and hope and life into me. I am also grateful for all the sermons I have heard and the lessons I have learned at seminary, and all the other ways in which spiritual shepherds have spoken into my life. And I am grateful for all of the church members who have shown me affection, blessed me, and included me in their lives over the years while I was their pastor. They touched my lives in many ways—more than I can name—and I'm a different person because of it.

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In the few days left here in October, is there someone you may wish to thank or encourage or bless? It may be good to show appreciation to your pastor or someone who has cared for you spiritually. And it's always good to give thanks to the Great Shepherd who endlessly, and gently cares for his sheep—all of us.

Great Shepherd of the Sheep, thank you for loving us so much that you would lay everything down for us so that we might be made free, well, and brought home with you to the Father. By your Spirit, we celebrate you in all your glory and goodness. Amen.

“For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.” 1 Thessalonians 2:1–8 NASB