

January 11, 2012

To the People of Shepherd of the Hills

The Church is the whole people of God in Christ Jesus. Because of the brokenness of people the Church has been divided into denominations. This parish is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Northwest Washington Synod.

As a Church the people, with the blessing and support of the whole Church, organize themselves into parishes. Those choices are made because of geography, individual preferences, loyalty to backgrounds, financial considerations, and other urges both Godly and not so Godly.

In ELCA parishes the people are expected to call a Pastor to provide leadership for the community that is in Christ. That leadership is for the sake of "decency and good order" which means that the Pastor is called for technological reasons and not for ontological reasons. In easier language that means that the Pastor is not a different person than other persons - nor a different quality of priest than all other believers - only that the Pastor is called to attend to specific tasks in the primary areas of Word and Sacrament around which the parish gathers.

This effort consists of "A Primer on the Pastor" and "The Care and Feeding of a Pastor." It is an attempt to speak to issues that are real, but often forgotten when parishes are in the decision making process for calling a new Pastor, and when a Pastor does the ministry to which she or he has been called. .

The material was prepared when the author was Interim Pastor at Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Sammamish, Washington. Parish responsibilities allowed time for reflection and writing.

Only God is omniscient. Any other person speaking of the work of God and the work of the people of God must do so with the Apostle's notion of "fear and trembling." With that in heart and mind this risk is taken

PART 1 - A PRIMER ON THE PASTOR

One of the first responsibilities of the parish is to recognize the gifts of an individual. "Be yourself. Everyone else is taken." Each Pastor of the Church is the unique gift of God to the Church and the Parish.

Pastors are expected to preside at the Altar and convey a sense that God is heavily invested in the words of forgiveness, reconciliation, prayer and praise. Honor the Pastor for the expertise that is brought to presiding at the Altar. At the Altar the gifts of all the people are gathered, and there all the gifts of God are present for the people.

A variety of gifts means that some Pastors exercise liturgical leadership in a way often described as “high Church.” Others prefer a “low Church” style. What is crucial is not style, but integrity.

Pastors pray for the people of the parish on a regular basis. For some it is a daily discipline. Other Pastors choose a different schedule, but keep the people in prayer.

Preaching is an honored office in the Church. Some are able to preach in a way that makes the angels glad. Others are able to say simple truths in simple language. Still others stammer through the sermon with the trust that God will make much of what has been offered.

Whatever the gifts of the preacher, be aware that God is working through this person to speak into the community the Word of God which creates exactly the thing that God wishes to create. "In the beginning God was the Word" and through the Word all things were brought into being. God's Word continues to be creative.

The Word of God is the engine driving the sermon. Preaching should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” That is what God does through the Word: radical graciousness partnered with radical demand.

The Biblical Word of radical graciousness is for those who are beaten up by the changes and chances of life. Listen carefully when God speaks the Word, “Comfort ye. Comfort ye.”

“Amazing Grace” is God's way with people. God binds God's self to each Baptized person. God gives God's self to people at every Eucharist. God speaks constantly of God's love for people – even when people are called to account for their choices.

Some doubt God's graciousness for themselves. Others doubt God's grace enfolds “them.” The Pastor's preaching will remind all people of the eternal lengths to which God goes to embrace the people – all the people.

When hope is spoken into ears and hearts take note. Hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism is akin to sweeping dirt under the rug and smiling when you trip over the lump. Hope takes life exactly as it is and allows God to speak the great “Nevertheless” to the people. That Word enables people to live life in a world where hate and violence often seem triumphant; where sickness seems stronger than wholeness; where faithfulness is not welcomed; where the future seems closed off. In all of those moments the Pastor speaks the Biblical Word “Nevertheless” this is God's world and God's time. It is in God's mind that God's realm will be all in all, and until that wonderful moment the faithful can look for the saving gift of God's hope.

Some refuse to believe they have intrinsic worth and value given to them in birth and Baptism. Gracious Biblical preaching will announce the gifts of worth and value to and for all the people. That is God's loving choice.

The Pastor will be present with the Word when the dead are buried. The Word spoken will be, "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life we commend to Almighty God our loved one." Listen carefully to that Word. Trust that Word.

The Pastor may make the congregation laugh out loud during the sermon. Remember that laughter is a sign of Jesus' Resurrection. The first thing Jesus must have done on Easter was to laugh in the face of violence and death. Every laugh has the potential to be an affirmation that Jesus lives and that violence and death have no future. That is the Easter Good News.

Care for the Biblical witness in preaching is matched by care for the Pastoral needs of the people. Pastors offer a level of care which is seldom equaled in the world because it is God's own care.

Every Pastor is called to listen to those who are sick, distressed by personal circumstances, or longing for a new and more wholesome spirituality. No Pastor is a mind reader. Persons must communicate their needs for Pastoral Care clearly and directly.

When the Pastor calls in home or hospital it is to bring the assurance that God is committed to the health and wholeness of the person and all the people. Listening will convey God's commitment to health and wholeness. An appropriate touch or anointing with oil can be a powerful witness to a person who is ill. Prayer is another resource available to the Pastor and the person.

When a Pastor takes time with an individual who experiences life in troublesome ways the Pastor is obliged to listen to the descriptions of the trouble and enable the person to see the discomfort clearly and discover resources that God is providing to move through the time. An effective tool in Pastoral Care is a referral. Some circumstances require the involvement of specifically trained healers.

Radical graciousness is partnered with radical demand. It is the ebb and flow of God's life among us. The Pastor will need to speak of God's demands as well as God's graciousness. Some balk at God's graciousness. Other resent God's demands.

Biblical preaching is highly regarded among Lutherans until the Bible truths fly in the face of people who settle for a casual rather than a relentless reading and study of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. National urges, cultural realities, economics, individual life choices, long standing prejudices, injustice, and a host of other ideas prized by those who live in the "real world" are often at odds with the Word of God.

The Biblical witness begins with the marvelous stories in Genesis. In the two Creation accounts it is clear that God loves human beings. The deeply loved human ones are entrusted with the responsibility to be co-Creators.

When the Pastor calls the people to be co-Creators with God it is truth telling. The people need to hear that all humans are wonderfully made and highly prized. The

people are to “be fruitful and multiply.” They are to exercise a stewardship in the earth that honors the Creator. They are to affirm the work of God’s Holy Spirit who is “the Lord and Giver of life.” (n.b. No adjective precedes “life” in the Nicene Creed.) Where life unfolds the people of God are called by God to sustain and nurture that life. The Pastor is to remember God’s work of Creation among the people. Sermons will have a place for encouraging the Baptized to be honored co-Creators with God.

A second theme in Hebrew Scriptures speaks to the liberation of people from bondage. God’s Word was that Moses was to go to Pharaoh with the Word, “Let my people go.” The work of announcing God’s liberation and encouraging further works of liberation falls to any Pastor preaching a Biblical Word.

This country is not North Korea. However, there are still those in bondage. God continues to send called leaders to say God’s Word, “Let my people go.”

Women trapped in cultural chains need to be set free. Children who are imprisoned in abusive households need to be freed. Men who are victimized by silly images of manhood need to be set free. Those caught in sin need to be set free. Those who are victims of prejudice need to be set free.

All who are in the many prisons fashioned by themselves or others need to be set free. The Pastor’s Biblical obligation is to preach to and for those people. The Pastor’s responsibility is one God commanded Moses: “go down to Egypt and tell Pharaoh, let my people go.”

Biblical preaching must also take into account the experience of the people with kings. Not altogether pleasant experiences, but ones that need preaching attention.

When Israel asked for a king (“just like the neighbors had”) the prophet Samuel advised them wisely. Samuel said Israel had a King. The King’s name was God.

The people clamored against Samuel and none too subtly against God. God gave the people what they wanted, though it didn’t turn out to be what they needed.

Kings became a liability faster than anyone could say, “Saul, David, Solomon.” The good that kings brought to their office was largely shaped by the courageous work of the prophets who spoke God’s Word in hard times.

Biblical politics “laugh the nations to scorn,” but among Lutherans the lessons of Israel’s kings have been lost. It is a sad truth that patriotism often trumps discipleship. Always remember that Jesus is among us as “Lord of Lords and King of Kings.” Primary loyalty belongs to Jesus and nothing or no one else.

The culture makes huge demands on the people of God. That has always been true. Those who are celebrated by the Church are persons who chose Christ over culture. A difficult choice fraught with danger, but the only choice for a disciple.

Economics. Nothing strikes fear into the hearts of Lutherans more than the Biblical Word about economic equity. Judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah is often credited to sexual excess. The Bible is quite clear: Sodom and Gomorrah came under the judgment of God for "... pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16: 49) Remember that when the Pastor speaks of the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor. Before you fault the preacher look carefully at the Word to which the preacher is obligated.

Individual life choices are a regular feature of the Word of God. The Ten Commandments are a gift to aid in choices.

The prelude to the Commandments is a statement of the gracious reality that we are God's own. "I am the Lord your God" (a Word about relationship) precedes the life giving directions for a healthy and whole life.

The Ten Commandments are not "The Ten Suggestions." Pastors and people know this huge Word is demand. Measuring individual life choices against the life giving Word God sets in the midst of the world is often painful.

Gossip is always fun until we are brought face to face with the Commandment not to bear false witness. Keeping God's Name holy is often neglected by casual use of profanity. Treating human sexuality as a recreational or commercial commodity brings people face to face with the Commandment about not committing adultery. (Adultery at its most fundamental is to take what is pure and defile it.)

Long standing prejudices will be questioned by preachers who take the Scriptures seriously. People who are uncomfortable about their own sexuality or the sexual identity of others pick a verse here and there to support their insecurities. The Pastor will always call the community to the values of love, acceptance, and inclusion on behalf of victims of prejudice. Those are predominant themes in Holy Scripture and those values are the ones against which all that is hurtful or hateful must be measured.

Injustice is a strong theme in the Word of God. No preacher may deny its harmful effect in the lives of the Biblical people, nor ignore its effect among God's people in every other time and place. The agenda for justice is set by the fullness of Scripture.

On many occasions the texts of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures will lead the faithful Pastor to meddle in the life of the world and the lives of people in the gathered community. Pastor and people have an obligation to the Word. Remembering that obligation will lead to a parish where roots are honored, ministry is done, and the future headed into the arms of God.

Parishes that call a Pastor to preach Bible based sermons need to consider seriously the Biblical witness. The stories of the people of Israel, of Jesus, and of the earliest Christians are not a self-help guide for personal piety. The stories intersect every life

experience known to people, and care must be taken to listen when the Pastor speaks at those crossroads.

PART 2 – THE CARE AND FEEDING OF A PASTOR

The primary work of the people of God in the care and feeding of Pastors is to pray each day for the Pastor. As a community of prayer the parish needs to commit itself to supporting the one in Public Ministry with prayer. There is no more significant support for the people of God to offer.

Prayer is to name the person in God's presence. God is not in need of diagnostic insight. God knows best what each and all need. To name the Pastor each day is to rely on God to provide the necessary measure of God's Holy Spirit to the one who is called to be a Pastor among the people.

Prayer has other faces. To affirm the Pastor in works that are well done is a form of praying. Evaluations (the root of the Latin word means, "to add value to") can be a form of prayer. Not every opinion is born in the heart of God, but each and all can learn from one another where there are areas deserving of praise and areas in need of growth.

Rest and relaxation are commanded. "Six days shalt thou labor, but the seventh is a Sabbath unto the Lord thy God." God worked and rested. People are to work and rest. The Pastor must keep faith with the Commandment

The Commandment is given because of the conviction that all of life is a gift from God and not of human making. Sabbath acknowledges that reality. We rest in God knowing all will be provided for in God's way and in God's time.

There are rhythms in life. To ignore them is to put life in jeopardy. Rest is among the rhythms. The Commandment anticipates that reality.

Pastors are expected to plan a work week with six days of labor and a seventh for the Pastor's own self. Some Pastors and parishes are wise enough to insist on more stated time away. That is a personal and parish choice.

However the rhythm of work and rest is scheduled the Pastor's time away should be respected. Phone calls on a day off often begin with the disclaimer, "I know this is your day off, but" No Pastor would fail to respond to an emergency on a day off. But, too often the interruptions are about matters that could easily wait until the next working day. Parishes that are careful with the Pastor's day off will find themselves better served by a rested and renewed Pastor.

Many Pastors find that an hour here and there for recreation or exercise is valuable. One Pastor suggested that every time he felt an urge to exercise he lay down on the

sofa until the urge passed. Not a good choice, but Parishes that resent time that Pastor takes for recreation or exercise make a mistake.

Vacation time is recommended as four weeks including Sundays. People who live out their Baptisms in other working environments often quarrel with the recommendation. Significant time away is an investment that pays dividends for the Pastor and the parish. With six working days a week as a norm – and often seven when the Pastor's schedule gets crowded with emergencies or additional responsibilities - means that extra vacation time is a matter of common sense and justice.

Money. Many in the Church hate it when any conversation turns to money. And when the Pastor's salary and benefits are the focus the level of discomfort rises.

Pastors do not belong to a union. No one is appointed to be an advocate for the Pastor when conversations about money and benefits take place.

Parishes might find it valuable to choose an advocate for the Pastor when there is a review of salary and reimbursable expenses. Individual clergy who make claims about their gifts and needs are often slandered for promoting themselves rather than promoting the good of the parish.

This Synod of the ELCA provides guidelines for Pastoral compensation. The guidelines are based on careful study of parity with other professionals, neighborhood housing costs, remuneration for reimbursable expenses (e.g. mileage, book allowance, professional expenses), pension and health care, and support for continuing education work.

Should a Pastor be well paid? Yes!

One of the most frequent causes of low Pastoral morale is an inadequate salary. There are Pastors whose salaries have not been adjusted in many years. The explanations vary. "We don't have enough income to increase the Pastor's salary. There is a lot of unemployment, so the Pastor should share in the burden. The economy is bad and getting worse. Pastors should have other things on their minds instead of money."

"We don't have enough money to increase the Pastor's salary."

At the heart of it that is a stewardship issue. Most congregations have a great deal of money available. The truth is that that money is not shared with the parish. Lay leaders and clergy need to address that issue in a straightforward way. Balancing the budget on the backs of Pastors and parish staff is a violation of basic justice.

"There is a lot of unemployment."

That is true and very hard for those who do not have work. But, 92% of the work force do have jobs. Many of those jobs are secure and the salaries are high.

There are communities where the employed have individual household incomes that exceed the parish budget. In those parishes what needs attention is stewardship – not skimping on the Pastor's salary.

“The economy is bad and getting worse.”

Is the Pastor responsible for the economy of the whole nation? No. In bad economic times each person must take stock of the need for personal sacrifices and public justice. Very few Pastors are greedy. Sacrifices are often made for the good the parish and the Church. But, sacrifices need to be shared throughout the parish and Church.

The further responsibility of each parish is to ask what adjustments were made to the Pastor's salary when the economy was doing well. A casual survey may lead to the discovery that the Pastor's salary wasn't raised when the economy was strong.

“Pastors should have things other than money on their minds.”

That is so insulting that any who say it should be ashamed. Every Pastor has tons of things on her or his mind. The Word and Sacraments. Care for the sick and needy. Issues of community or national justice. Administering the parish business. Encouraging lay leadership. Mediating parish conflict. Reading a book. Praying.

No Pastor says “Yes” to God's call in order to become rich. Every Pastor knows that with eight years of education there are many better paying jobs. But, Pastors have not been called to live out their Baptisms in any of those places.

Money will be on the mind of the Pastor when there is not enough to support a modest life style. Many Pastors find themselves with enormous student loans that have to be paid. Some first call Pastors have been forced to say “no” to a Call Committee because the compensation package was not adequate to care for “daily bread” and student loans. That is a waste for the parish and the Pastor.

Parishes are expected to pay pension and health benefits. Not every employer pays both. Some pay neither. But, the Church is not “every employer.”

The pension plan provides a measure of security for retirement years. Pastors who are good stewards will try to save additional funds for retirement, but the pension plan is the foundation stone of retirement income for most ELCA clergy.

Health costs continue to be an issue in the Church and the society. Parishes are expected to cover the health insurance for the Pastor and family. It is expensive, but sickness and economic devastation are more expensive.

Pastors are encouraged to make healthy life choices, but Pastors are no more perfect than other people when those decisions are made. Some Pastors or family members

are victimized by disease which is beyond the control of anyone. Care must be taken to insure that health care costs are covered at a rate which prevents a heart break from becoming a bankruptcy.

Social Security. Pastors are considered “self-employed” by the IRS. That means that Pastors pay both the employer’s share and the employee’s share of Social Security. Many parishes decide to pay the employer’s share of Social Security. Every parish should consider how best to handle remuneration in this area.

Housing allowance is set by parish council action each year. That enables the Pastor to exclude from IRS income the amount actually spent for housing up to the designated total set by council action. It is a helpful tax break shared by some others in the nation.

Parish Councils can assist by setting the housing allowance at the highest percent allowed by the IRS. It is good stewardship for the Pastor and represents no cost to the parish.

When calling a Pastor the parish should be aware of the vast differences in real estate values. A Pastoral candidate from New York City could arrive with a wheelbarrow full of equity funds. A Pastor moving from Phoenix would only need a change purse. Pastors called to any area of the Church need to be aware of relative real estate costs. Parishes should become educated about those costs, and discover if there are needs the parish could meet with a loan, etc.

“The Pastor’s mind should not be the poor box of the Church.” Hebrew and Christian Christians encourage God’s people to love God with heart and soul and mind. The Pastor has the obligation of obedience.

The mind of the Pastor needs to be nurtured so it grows and develops. There are as many different mechanisms for growth as there are Pastors.

One Pastor spent two weeks of study leave each year reading through the Gospel for the coming Church year. A new commentary was studied to enhance the reading. It added value and insight to the preaching of that Pastor. Other Pastors prefer to learn in summer sessions provided by the Church. Still other Pastors use study leave time to experience Church life in other parts of the world.

Parishes should set aside time and money to support learning. The time and money allowance will enhance the Pastor’s mind and the Pastor’s ministry.

The Pastor has regular opportunities for learning. Synod clusters usually have text study groups which allow time for considering Scripture readings for coming Sundays. Ideas are exchanged and growth happens.

Some clergy find a spiritual director is an assist in their journey with God and the people. Qualified spiritual directors are worth their weight in gold. The health of the Pastor's spirituality is an important resource for the parish.

No Pastor is the sole property of the parish. Each Pastor in the ELCA is a Pastor of the whole Church. There are duties which every Pastor has an obligation to meet. Representing the teaching posture of the ELCA. Synod Assembly. Bishop's Convocation. Service on a Synod or Church-wide committee. Being an advocate for the financial support of the Synod and Church.

Each of the above responsibilities is a part of parish ministry for the Pastor. Parishes will find their horizons widened by the Pastor's participation in the whole Church.

Many Pastors have families. The Pastor's family is not the property of the parish.

Some spouses are very comfortable being involved with parish life. Other spouses find fulfillment in doing their ministries in areas outside the parish. Some strike a healthy balance.

There are spouses who have personal and professional demands. Those should be respected by the parish.

Pastoral schedules are often daunting. Time for family has to be made. The wise Pastor will manage family and parish time. The wise parish will respect appropriate choices made by the Pastor.

Pastoral preferences in dress and personal choices are exactly that: preferences. Respect the preferences.

Some Pastors choose a clerical collar for all their working time. Clergy shirts are not cheap, but the plastic collar replaces the need for expensive and matched neckwear.

Some Pastors smoke, drink, and play the slots. Other Pastors would rather be caught dead than do any of the above. Some are fans of local sports. Others cannot differentiate between a baseball and a basketball. There are Pastors who love the Symphony and Opera and other Pastors who love an evening with vintage rock and roll. Some like art. Others cannot distinguish between a Rembrandt and a paint by number picture.

Every Pastor is unique. Learn to love that individuality.

Last as in first in the Care and Feeding of a Pastor: Pray for your Pastor every day.

A Primer on the Pastor. The Care and Feeding of a Pastor. This material is a gift to any who may find encouragement in it and learning from it.

Thanks to Martina Randall who is office manager at Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church for making "magic" with the computer.

God's peace,

R. L. Christensen