

## **Caring for Others Like Jesus Did**

John 21:15-19

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A few months ago a Baptist church in another state decided to purge their church roll of non-active members. I do not know what criterion they used for deciding who fell into this category, but the church sent a letter out to all the delinquent members and it was signed by the pastor.

Our friend who shared the letter with us was informed that she and her family had been moved to “non-active” status and if they didn’t start attending more often they would eventually be purged from the church roll and they would no longer be members of the church.

Our friend admits to being an occasional worship attendee. She would attend more often but the last several years this woman has felt the burden of caring for a husband whose health is rapidly declining.

She has also dealt with the stress of caring for an adult son, whose health issues she has chosen to keep very private.

She and her husband faithfully watch a well-known pastor each Sunday morning on television and she faithfully sends her tithe.

The letter created a lot of pain. She read it more than once and each time she read it, she cried.

At the bottom of the letter it spelled out how she and her family could become in good standing again with the church, which included going through a new member’s class.

She asked me how she thought she should respond.

As I pondered my answer, I thought about the way the pastor signed the letter. Instead of signing the letter with his name, the signature at the bottom of the letter was simply, “Pastor.”

But was he? Was he this family’s pastor? Did he know them? Did he know their pain? Did he know their struggles? Did he know why they were not at church?

Pastor has been his occupation and it might have been his official title, but he wasn’t this family’s pastor.

How could he be? He didn’t know them.

This made me think of the times I have been pastor in name only to some of you, but for whatever reason I may have failed to give you the time, the love, or the attention that you wanted or expected of me.

That happened once to Jesus. His friends Martha and Mary had sent for him. Their brother Lazarus was sick. Jesus came but by the time he arrived, Lazarus was dead.

Martha was quick to point out to Jesus that he had failed to be her pastor. “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” (John 11:21)

Of course, Jesus’ delay was intentional. He had not neglected her, but had a greater purpose in mind in not coming when he did, as he raised Lazarus from the dead.

I’ve been your pastor long enough that I erased any doubts of having any divine qualities long ago. If I haven’t disappointed you at least once by now, wait a little longer.

I don’t have Jesus’ sense of timing nor his gift of healing, but I do love you, and it hurts me when I wound you.

I do want to remind you that even though the staff wears vestments, have titles, and seminary degrees, we are not the only shepherds.

While there are reasonable expectations of us to be present in times of grief and loss, we are not all-knowing. Neither are we capable of ministering to every need. Even if we were, it would be unhealthy for us to do so.

Biblically, we are supposed to be equippers. In the book of Acts, the Apostles designated seven men who were filled with the Holy Spirit to take care of a problem that had developed. The ministry of distributing bread to Greek and Jewish widows was not being done equally. These men were ask to solve the problem. Baptists see a pattern of deacon ministry in this passage. The Apostles set up this plan so they could continue to keep their focus on preaching the gospel.

When Jesus breathed his Holy Spirit into his disciples, he gave them the power to shepherd others.

When you received the gift of the Holy Spirit, you also received that power.

As disciples, the Lord expects us to be much more than observers. We are to be Jesus to others. You are the only Jesus many people will ever know. You are the only Bible some people will ever read.

Once after the death of a young cancer patient, a chaplain consoled a nurse that had been the primary care-taker for the patient for most of that year.

The chaplain saw the care and the compassion of the nurse in addition to her nursing skills.

As she wept out of sight of other patients and staff, the chaplain took off his chaplain’s badge and pinned it on the nurse and said, “Wear this for a little while and be reminded that as well as a great nurse, you are also a healer of souls.”

You should become comfortable wearing the name tag, “shepherd.” We all shepherd people. This is of course an old biblical phrase. Modern words are teacher, leader, guide, protector, healer, or caretaker.

In biblical times it was a shepherd’s job to live among the sheep and take care of them.

The shepherd had to sleep among them and stay with them around the clock. He moved them from field to field and made sure they had green grass and water to drink.

When the sheep were sick he had to play veterinarian. Sometimes he’d place oil on their heads to keep away the flies and keep the sheep from going crazy.

When the sheep were afraid, the shepherd would calm them with his staff. When they were in danger, the shepherd would protect them.

When death loomed, the shepherd had to give them assurance and comfort.

A shepherd’s presence made the difference whether sheep lived, died, or lived with peace.

In the 23rd Psalm, the Psalmist confessed that the Lord was his shepherd.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he had an interesting conversation with Peter, the disciple that betrayed him.

“Feed my lambs,” he told him.

“Take care of my sheep,” he said.

“Feed my sheep.”

Jesus wanted Peter to shepherd others. Jesus wanted Peter to do what he had done with them. Jesus took off his chaplain’s badge and he pinned it on Peter. It was as if Jesus said, “Now you go be Jesus to others.”

The scripture says that God has given some to “apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ’s followers in skilled servant work.” These roles are often viewed as clergy types of roles.

However, when we love one another with the love of Jesus, we are naturally going to show behavior that is shepherding.

When Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you,” (John 13:34) he was telling all of us to shepherd each other.

When Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ,” (Galatians 6:2) he was telling us to do the work of a shepherd.

We are empowered to do this through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Just as an apprentice learns how to weld from an experienced welder, we can learn shepherding skills when they are taught to us.

We can learn listening skills and how to encourage others.

We can learn to share one another's burdens and extend God's grace to each other.

We can learn to forgive and practice hospitality.

We can show compassion, generosity, and go the extra mile.

We can learn how to demonstrate patience and show good will.

We can learn to pray for each other as well as for our enemies.

We can learn to hold each other accountable.

We can learn to build each other up.

We can learn to offer grace and forgiveness.

We are not born equipped to do any of these things. We must learn them from others and we also learn them from God.

God can change our hearts and we learn these things for the Good Shepherd.

Whenever we are obedient to the calling and voice of God, we become the salt and light of the world. Whenever that occurs, we are shepherding someone. We are setting an example.

As we write our future story, let's think about what it looks like to shepherd each other.

We must teach, guide, and direct our younger generation. If we do not place a strong emphasis on these, the most impressionable among us, our future is in jeopardy. Our faith will die with the current generation.

No future story will look like the past story. We have a better chance of guiding the future if we listen to God and intentionally set a sail to catch the wind to go in a certain direction.

We gave you a peppermint candy cane, much like you see at Christmas, because it's in the shape of a shepherd's staff. It's to remind you of those people in your life that are in your circle of influence. Who are those people that you have an opportunity to teach, lead, guide, protect, or take care of.

These are people who look to you for love, advice, affirmation, and acceptance.

These may be people who depend on you financially, emotionally, socially, and physically. These are people you shape morally, politically, and theologically.

These may be people who do not always treat you with the love and respect, yet you remain unconditionally devoted to them because that's what love does. Who are these people in your life? Name them. List them.

As we move through our 100 days of prayer, pray for them. Ask God to give you wisdom in knowing how to lead them, even as you deal with issues of your own.

When we realize that others are depending on us, we learn to depend more on God.

Secondly, think of the names of those people who have been shepherds in your life. These names should come to you quickly.

Who have been those guides, teachers, mentors, leaders, coaches, protectors, and caretakers for you? These people may still be shepherds for you even now.

Now, that you have several names, how many of those names were actually professional clergy?

My guess is that a lot of you don't have single pastor on the list.

I did this to show you the influence that you have on the lives of others is significant.

I did this to show you that if this church is to ever grow beyond 200, it will not be because of me, or the rest of our staff. It will be because of you. It will be because of all of us.

I can't get to all the needs. Jesus didn't design the church that way. He breathed the Holy Spirit into all of us and he gave us all different gifts, but all us are capable of learning how to take care of each other.

To the degree that we learn that usually correlates with how well we listen to God and how well we listen to one another.

Let's continue to do that through these 100 days of prayer. Let's shepherd each other and grow a strong vibrant church.

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