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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 17, Series C
Saturday, August 27th, 2022
Sunday, August 28th, 2022

Sermon: “Remember Your Leaders”

Texts: Hebrews 13:1-17

Focus: Christ and His Word never change.

Function: That they would trust and follow their pastors, who teach them the Word of God.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it” (SC, Third Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord
Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:7, 17, ESV).¹

I want you to close your eyes for a moment (but only for a moment—don’t fall asleep during my sermon!). Think of the pastors and priests that you have known, past and present, who have made the greatest impact on your life of faith. Perhaps it was the pastor who taught you confirmation or led you through pre-marriage classes. There

¹ All Scripture, unless otherwise indicated, is from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

might have been a pastor whose preaching pricked your heart and provoked your mind to think more deeply about the Scriptures. Maybe it was a hospital or military chaplain who gave you the courage to keep the faith and fight the good fight. He or she may have stood by you and prayed with you and for you through big health challenges or the dark night of the soul.

Do you have somebody in mind? Good. Now what was it about their manner and ministry that made a lasting impression on you? Their joviality or gentleness? Their vast intellect or deep compassion? Maybe it was their memorable sermons, or maybe it was just the fact that they were always there when you needed them. Whoever that pastor may be or may have been, I want you to remember them right now.

For that is what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews urges us to do: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God” (Heb. 13:7a). Earlier this month we spent two entire Sundays remembering the Old Testament saints of God who went before us in the faith. Today we remember our pastors and other church leaders who taught us God’s Word and how to handle the holy Scriptures.

Remembering is part of the way that we give thanks to God for people he brings into our lives. The apostle Paul was big on giving thanks for his fellow Christians. In Philemon, he wrote, “I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers” (Phm. 4). In Philippians, Paul said of an entire congregation, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you” (Phil. 1:3). Thanksgiving and remembrance go together. And just as pastors give thanks for their congregations—especially for their faith—so also we give thanks to God for our teachers of the Word.

Yet as we remember our former pastors, we must do more than remember. We are also told to “consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7b). What kind of life did they live? What kind of faith did they believe? How did they love and serve God and his people? How did they handle the Word of God in both its Law and its Gospel messages? How did they persevere through hardship? How did they humble themselves before the cross of Jesus to receive his mercy as his children?

The reason we “consider,” or carefully examine, our pastors’ lives is so that we can emulate them. St. Paul says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). The Greek word for “imitate” (*mimein*) is where we get the English word *mimic*. We follow the example of our pastors and other church leaders as they follow the example of Jesus.

This is a difficult thing for me to say, because I know that I am a sinner like you, and I have said and done things that I regret. I tend to be anxious and worry about many things. I have some weird quirks and insecurities. Sometimes we have had sharp disagreements. Yet I hope that even in the midst of disagreement and conflict, I have been able to show you the way of humility by apologizing for my mistakes and asking for your forgiveness. For the ultimate example is that of Jesus, who, for the sake of our salvation, humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-6).

God calls us to remember our leaders, consider their way of life, and imitate their faith. But that is not all. The Bible also teaches that we are to obey our pastors and submit to them in spiritual matters:

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:7).

Obedience and submission are difficult words for us, especially in the American church. American culture upholds and exalts the glory of individualism, and we brace against other forms of God-given authority. We do well to remember what Jesus says: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

Nevertheless, as much as we would like to think that we have a right to live our lives however we wish, God’s Word clearly teaches that God has certain expectations and standards. The Ten Commandments are *not* the Ten Suggestions. Christ’s commands in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies and pray for those who hurt us are not just fine sentiments. They deal with the real life, nitty-gritty nuts and bolts of living as a forgiven sinner in a fallen world.

So when our pastor tells to stop gossiping about others or to stop shacking up before marriage or to stop cheating on our tithes and taxes

or to show proper honor to the governing authorities—whether we like them or not—what he speaks is the very Word of God. And if the word the pastor speaks is God’s Word—and not man’s word—we are on the hook to do things God’s way.

Nothing causes more heartache and sleepless nights for pastors than to witness the ways in which the members of the congregation wander away from Jesus by their disobedience, unbelief, or outright laziness. We worry about the sheep that don’t come to church anymore because they claim to be too busy or angry or afraid to gather with their brothers and sisters. We wake up in the middle of the night, thinking about your estranged children, troubled marriages, drug and alcohol addictions, dire financial straits, and illness and disease. And because there is often nothing else that we can do for you, especially if you refuse to heed God’s instruction, we pray for you.

In 2 Corinthians 11, St. Paul catalogs all the ways he suffered for the Gospel, including beatings, hunger, and shipwrecks. Yet the greatest form of suffering he endured was his constant concern for Christ’s Church. “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me

of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). We worry and keep awake because we love and care for you. Just as a father wants only the best for his children, so we only want the best for you.

So help me to do this with joy and not with grumbling, because that would not be to your advantage. Try not to stir up gossip or sow division and discontent in the congregation. Be at peace with one another—and with me. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Confess your sins to one another—and forgive one another, as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven you. Respect the authority that God has given me as the pastor called in this place. For I am only the under-shepherd of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. I do my best to love and serve you in the kingdom of God. “By the grace of God, I am what I am...” (1 Cor. 15:10). Please help and do not hinder my ministry among you.

The Bible teaches that we owe our pastors many things. Fair wages are necessary and other forms of generosity are always appreciated. The Bible instructs us: “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share *all good things* with his instructor” (Gal. 6:6). And “the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of

double honor, *especially* those whose work is preaching and teaching.

For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’” (1 Tim. 5:17-18). Thank *you* for your generous support of my ministry and the mission of this church. My family is well provided by your tithes, offerings, and financial support.

Words of appreciation and gratitude give us a lot of mileage too, even though we seek God’s approval and not man’s (Gal. 1:10). Yet what pastors need more than anything are the prayers of God’s people. “Pray for us,” begins the next verse of Hebrews 13. Although verse 18 is not included in our epistle lesson, it is part of the same section and logic. “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things” (Heb. 13:18).

Pastors pray publicly and privately for their flock. The needs and cries of God’s people—as well as their joyful praise—is frequently upon our lips. Yet pastors rarely hear others pray for them. A small number of you assure me from time to time that you pray for me, for which I am eternally grateful (that’s not an exaggeration). But I also need to *hear*

you pray for me. I need you to pray *with* me and *over* me and *for* me when I am present with you. There is nothing like prayer to sustain the faith and energy of a pastor.

This side of heaven, there is no perfect church. Nor is there any perfect pastor besides Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd of the Sheep. Not even our sainted shepherds and favorite pastors from long ago were perfect. They were sinners too. We are all sinners in need of God's mercy and grace. Yet if we believe and hold fast to the cross of Christ, we are forgiven, and we receive eternal life. Through all the changes of our lives, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). His word never wavers. His promise is always true. He is faithful to forgive. The same great love that drove Jesus to suffer outside the city for our sins is the same love that gathers and brings us into his family of faith. "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb. 13:15). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.